

# BLACKGUARD



A MY HERO  
ACADEMIA FANZINE

Sometimes the world doesn't need another hero...

Sometimes what it needs is someone willing to do  
what the heroes won't

The mod team would like to send out a huge thank you to everyone who participated in this zine. We are so glad that you are here with us and helped this project become a reality

# REBELLIUM

by Shimikonde

Embers light Jiro's face as she sits in a dim stairway, stolen cigarette placed between her lips. It's become traditional to light up before a show because of the way it slows everything down, making synapses in her brain flare and her heart race in her chest even as the world comes to a crawl around her. The smoke feels like fire in her lungs, like it's incinerating her from the inside out, and she holds it in until she feels lightheaded before letting it out in a long exhale. It drifts up from her mouth in swirling currents. Jiro watches them disappear through the spots in her vision.

Tonight, Rebellium is playing in an old factory building on the outskirts of Shibuya. It's a place that one of their fans had found, broken and abandoned, forgotten by society and unlikely to bring attention to them no matter how much noise they make. When they'd first picked it as a venue, it had been empty—a crumbling expanse of iron-reinforced cement with nothing to its name but a half-collapsed second storey and a wide, unobstructed ground floor—but since then they'd done all they could to fill it with life, covering the walls in posters and paint and letting their spent bottles and cigarette butts decorate the ground like trophies.

She listens to people filter in through the vibrations in the wall, smooth and cool from the layers of paint covering it, a contrast to the rough cement steps beneath her.

Something's off today. She feels it in the rhythm of their stamping feet, the chaotic white noise interspersed by shallow, stuttering rests, like hiccups in the crowd.

Time passes like it doesn't exist as she contemplates them, but before she can quite figure it out, her drummer peaks around the top of the stairs.

"We're up in ten."

She sighs, glances down at her cigarette to find it ashes on her fingers, and flicks the butt to the ground with the others as she pushes herself up. A familiar tension on the air makes the short hairs on the back of her neck prickle as she slings her guitar over her shoulder, but it's not until she's climbed the stairs and is standing at the edge of the stage that she finally puts a name to it.

Hundreds of people roar at once as she steps up to the mic, so loud that she feels it in her bones. She pauses as she looks out over the lot of them, putting names to the faces she can make out in the dim lighting. The hulking, fur-cloaked figure in the front is Yamato, a man that had nearly been taken in on false accusations of purse-snatching. Hiding in the corner is Shion, who no longer feels comfortable around crowds after being surrounded by heroes and beaten within an inch of his life for peddling drugs. Already making a mosh pit in the center of the mass of bodies is a woman that goes by Julie, who had nearly been arrested after stealing to provide for her hungry family. By the time Jiro got to her, she'd been bloodied, cuffed, and stuffed into a police car—but Jiro had made her name saving people from such situations and it hadn't been hard to extract her after running the car into a telephone pole.



Everyone here has the same story: failed by society, they found themselves in need of protection from the very thing that was meant to protect them.

That was where Jiro came in.

But something is different today. As she looks over them, she thinks their anger is the same as always. She can feel their hot, violent passion in the buzz of their voices and the thrum of their hearts beating against their ribs, in the lines and scars on their faces—but there are too many she doesn't recognize. People are mixed with the crowd, dressed in frayed, patched-up clothes to match it, but unable keep up with the mad fervor. Moving against the rhythm.

The odd tension grows in the air as she stands in front of the mic, familiar and so thick and obtrusive it's like she's moving underwater. Jiro lets it glide off her skin as she snatches the microphone from its stand.

Spreading her legs to center herself, she brings it to her mouth and takes a deep breath, watching the people below do the same, swelling in anticipation. The venue quiets just for a heartbeat as she pauses, lungs fully distended. On some level, she knows that she should end this before the cracks she feels in the crowd have a chance to shatter the night, but it's never been her style to bend over when trouble comes knocking. Whatever happens tonight will happen, she tells herself.

If the heroes want a show, she'll give them one.

She grips the microphone so hard that her fingers go white around it and screams.

~

The first time Jiro went to an anti-hero rally was when she was twelve, in her first year of junior high school. She was one of six first-years who had elected to join the light music club, and they were all sitting around in a circle talking about their aspirations after a jam session as Ænima played quietly in the background. Most of them wanted to go into music, either to start a band or join an existing one. When it got to be Jiro's turn and she expressed that wanted to be a hero, the atmosphere soured. She remembers the uncomfortable silence, bridged only by the guitar solo as the senior members looked at each other, trading one's alarm for another's knowing smile, and then back at her.

The club president, a girl named Makino that Jiro had been head-over-heels for at the time, broke the silence with a chuckle, arms folded in front of her. "How about you go out with us this Sunday?" she'd asked.

Nowadays, Jiro likes to think that she'd have gone even if she'd had any idea what she was getting herself into.

Not wanting to be outdone, and likely just as smitten by the president as she was, the rest of the first years had also agreed to go to the rally that weekend. It was a radical anti-Endeavor march, the kind that came accompanied by a police escort and a whole drove of pro heroes, all dressed up like they were going to war. At one point, Makino spat in the face of someone from Endeavor's agency, and it earned her a face-full of pepper spray and a

black eye that would later get her suspended from school for her refusal to cover it up.

All of the other first years ended up dropping the club after that. Jiro wasn't sure if it was due to her crush or pure stubbornness that she had chosen not to. It would still be two more years before she gave up on being a hero.

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The problem, she thinks, is that heroes aren't held accountable for their actions. They're humans that are being portrayed as something more than that: expounded, packaged, and sold as symbols of virtue. Heroes aren't gods or characters in a story, though, and in the pursuit of someone who will look good on the television, who will sell boxes of cereal, who can be remodeled from plastic and sealed up tight in boxes advertising twenty catchphrases and posable limbs, anything that doesn't fit their narrative of virtuosity needs to be swept under the rug. They are a group of people who are both physically and financially powerful, with the support of both the police and the media, and no one but the adoring public to keep them in check.

But times are changing. As Jiro screams into the mic, her people scream back at her, and they are all as pissed off as she is.

She likes to start her shows with Make the News because it's the first song that she'd ever written with purpose. It's seething and fast-paced, an unambiguous, fevered work of passion that is not her best work by any means—but it gets the crowd pumping, lights a flame under the mosh pit, and it sets the tone for the rest of the night. None of them are here for the sophistication of her music. They're here for the emotion and for the message. They're here so that they can blow their voices out screaming through the night and be validated by the fact that she's right doing the same thing along with them.

Usually, Rebellium tends to play in full public view. They set up impromptu performances on street corners or in front of the agencies of heroes they want to steer public attention to. Rather than a concert, it's more accurate to describe them as publicity stunts. Her band never gets through more than their first couple songs before chaos breaks out and the show comes to an end.

When they play at venues, though, it's more personal. It's all about them.

By the end of the first song, the smell of wet concrete and sweat hangs thick in the air. Jiro doesn't let herself get lost in the music like she normally might, planted in front of the stand with her guitar slung around her shoulder. As she plays, she picks out the new faces that she's sensed in the crowd. She watches one push to the front as another fights to keep his place in the middle. There had been one standing by the mosh pit, but he got elbowed in the face by Julie in the middle of the song and had to edge his way out of the crowd when he couldn't stop his bleeding nose. As far as she can tell, there are fifteen of them inside the building, and she doesn't know how many are hiding outside.

The baseline vibrates up her spine as it picks back up, setting a slower tempo for their next song, Blood in the Streets. Leaning over her microphone, she eyes an unfamiliar man leaning against the far wall, dressed in leather with blonde hair hanging long and loose around his shoulders, and freezes over for a quarter note as he stares straight back at her, unabashed.

The bassist sends her a concerned glance that she doesn't return. Instead, she moves to the very edge of the crumbling floor, dragging her stand along with her, never breaking eye contact with the man in the back. He mutters something, turning the tension oppressive and sludgy in her lungs as the people she's been keeping an eye on begin to move all at once, stiff against the flow of the crowd, looking from above like puppets on strings.

Jiro puts a hand behind her back as she starts the next song and signals to her bandmates, thumb pointed down at the ground.

The next song is going to be their last.  
~

The protests that Jiro had attended with her friends had, for the most part, been peaceful. There was the occasional fistfight when someone stepped beyond the picket lines or if someone from one side of the barricade said something particularly inflammatory to someone on the other, but it was all localized—brief bouts of violence that ended with someone in a police car almost before they could begin. Every single time, she felt something building in the people around her, making the atmosphere hotter and dizzier, ballooning out until it was fit to burst.

On the day that it finally did, Jiro immediately knew something was different. She sensed it in the jittery motions of the protestors and the hard-set expressions on the police, in the way the people pushed against the barricades with their fists raised in the air. At the time, she'd chalked up the pressure to the size of the crowd, easily double any that she'd ever been to up until then, with more than quadruple the ratio of heroes to keep them in line.

It took a flaming bottle flying over Jiro's head to rip her from the illusion of safety she'd constructed for herself. The entire thing had been a blur from then on, of fire and exploding glass, of elbows and screams, the sting of tear gas on the wind and the heat when Endeavor showed up mid-way through, making it feel like Jiro had stepped out of December and into August.

She might have been crushed under a hundred pairs of feet if it hadn't been for Makino catching her mid-fall. Jiro doesn't know what happened to her after that, only that the next time she saw her Makino was lying on the ground, her body cooling as blood pooled from her head. There were never any numbers released, so Jiro can't say with any certainty how many people died that day, just that she had been the only one of her friends who'd survived it.

There was a saying that she'd heard before but never understood, painting the town red. Jiro vividly remembers how surreal it had been to walk through the blood-stained streets, watching it drain into the gutters, and thinking that that must have been what the saying was referring to.  
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The music winds down at the end of the second song, leaving only a slow drum line and the lead guitarist strumming along to the beat. It acts as a backdrop as she briefly puts the mic back in its stand, flexing her empty hands and leaning forward to it.

"You know, every time I end a show, I have one of you guys come up to me asking all kinds of dumb questions." Her voice comes out rough as she begins speaking but goes high in her throat as she continues, mocking. "'Jiro, is it okay to buy lattes from Starbucks?' 'Do you think I'm selling out if I wear Levis?' 'Can I still be a part of Rebellium if I think Hawks is hot?' Stupid shit like that. What do you think I tell them?"

She tilts the microphone out toward the crowd, grinning through her teeth as the venue fills with the incomprehensible roar of a hundred shouted answers. When they die down, she brings it back and continues in a slow baritone. "Yeah, you're all on the same page now, but this happens every single time I end a show. So, I'm just gonna get it out of the way now: I don't give a fuck what you do. I'm not your mom. I'm not your fucking kindergarten teacher. It's not my job to dress you up and tell you what to do or what to think.

"The only freedom we have is up here." She taps her head with two fingers, wrapping both hands around the microphone stand. "Don't give it up to me or anyone else just because it's easier. How do you know I have your best interests in mind, huh? Because I say I do?" Her voice gradually raises until she's shouting, gripping the stand so tight she's afraid it might snap.

It's a tantrum more than it's a song, but put alongside the beat of the drums it sounds musical, flowing out of her like it's a poem, like she's rehearsed this before. "Wake up! Open your eyes! Use your head! Make your own goddamned decisions!"

She takes a deep breath, cheeks flushed as her heart thumps in her throat, and resists the urge to throw the microphone onto the floor to punctuate her frustration as she gestures wide with her hands. "What the fuck's the point of fighting a system of oppression if you all just blindly follow each other into the next one?"

The crowd cheers at this, and it's almost frustrating the way they seem to cling to her every word.

Her bandmates know her well by now. As soon as the crowd quiets, the bass rumbles low from the speakers and the beat picks back up. The guitarist changes chords and Jiro lets herself slide into the next song along with them, her mind still going a mile a minute.

Whatever's going to happen is going to happen soon. So, before she starts singing again, she brings the mic to her mouth once more. Softer, she mutters into it, "Things are going to get a little hairy tonight. No matter what happens, I want you all to remember: your mind is the one thing that they can never take from you. Think hard and decide for yourselves if this is the battle you want to die fighting."

The air congeals into something cold and solid as her words sink in. The chatter goes quiet and the mosh pit freezes over. There's a brief lull in the music as her bandmates startle behind her, but Jiro knows them, too, and trusts them to keep playing as she continues.

"To the heroes in the audience tonight, the next song is for you," she says, cutting through the tension with a strong, clear voice. "This is Present Pretense!"

Following the riot that killed her friends, Jiro had been afraid to leave the house for weeks. Just calming her shaking had taken days in itself, and there had been a period of time in which she'd stayed glued to the TV, curled in a ball under her duvet. Heroes from all over the country gave canned statements about the incident, which had been classified as a villain attack. They expressed their condolences to the families of the heroes who died and said nothing of the countless innocent people who had also died that day.

Her friends had always told her that hero society was corrupt: rotten to the core and not worth the effort it would take to reform it. "The whole thing needs to be wiped clean and rebuilt from scratch," Makino would say. "It needs to be replaced entirely by something with more checks and balances. Otherwise, the people in power are going to keep getting away with murder. Literally."

Jiro wishes she'd taken it more seriously before the people in power were able to get away with theirs.

Most of the heroes that crowd Jiro's stage are small-fries that she can't recognize at a glance. They look young, like fresh graduates, and she uses their inexperience against them as she fights, engaging them in close combat and pulling every dirty trick she can think of to catch them off guard. She swings her guitar off her shoulders and uses it to smash one of them in the face as another comes up from behind to grab her, only to become her personal amp as she thrusts an earjack into him. Someone clocks her in the back of the head and she falls at their feet, only to use her next heartbeat to make the wall collapse down atop them.

The heroes have underestimated them. She thinks this at the same time she thinks that this can't be all that they've brought—and then both thoughts are erased by something overwhelmingly loud tearing through the air from behind her. It's high and deafening, sounding of airports and tires screeching against the pavement, and goes on for so long that she's screaming by the end of it, her hands clamped over her ears.

The entire venue comes to a standstill, heroes and dissidents alike staring towards its source, so stiff and silent it's hard to think they've just been at each other's throats. Jiro doesn't have to look behind her to know who it is.

"Present Mic," she announces, her own voice sounding distant through the ringing in her ears, which feel to be plugged with cotton. "You should've told me you were coming. We could've arranged a duet."

A lump sits in her throat as she turns to face him and he laughs, his smile appearing more a grimace as he furrows his brows and says, "Wouldn't that have been a show?" His voice is loud enough that it sounds clear even as the rest of the world comes to her in muffled whispers.

Jiro narrows her eyes, spreading her feet to prepare for an attack, to which he waves his hands in the air in front of him, as if in surrender.

"Wait!" He says the word in English. "I want to make a deal."

"Could've fooled me."

It forces a chuckle from him. "Point taken. But, to be fair, we hadn't done anything until you outed us."

Jiro doesn't even want to dignify that with a response. At the same time, though, she doesn't want it said that she didn't give someone the opportunity to speak when asked for it, so she unclenches her fists and gives him an expectant look.

"Let me guess, you want me to turn myself in?"

His expression softens slightly. "You're a smart girl, so I won't sugarcoat things. One way or another, you're going to be leaving this place in a pair of cuffs. If you come in peacefully and take our deal, we can—I can promise that you'll be sent home after a quick trial."

"And what about the others?" she asks. "There are a lot of good people here tonight. If I come with you, will you let them go, too?"

"That... will depend on the severity of their untried offenses." His head slumps on his shoulders.

Jiro nods as if she's expected this, because she has.

"I'd really prefer not to fight you if I can help it," he says after a moment, and she thinks he's telling the truth from the way the corners of his mouth droop. "I'm a big fan of your mom's, and I don't think she'll be too thrilled to give me an autograph if I send her daughter to prison. Plus, I've got students your age, and—"

"You know, when I was younger, I wanted to be a hero, too. I thought that I'd change the system from the inside out."

"It's not too late." He sounds desperate. "There's still nothing stopping you."

Jiro recalls watching him on the television, her entire world held within that small square of flickering light, and feeling it slip away as he opened his mouth. It pains me to hear of the recent villain attacks. I want to express my condolences...

It wasn't that her heart had sunk, but rather that it had emptied at once, the contents fleeing from her mouth, from her pores and follicles, from her ears, nose, and eyes until she was left void and empty, free of her dreams and vacant for the feelings of betrayal that soon came to roost.

He stares pleadingly at her now, and the irony forces a bitter smile to her lips.

"When a tooth rots to the core, what do you do?" she asks.

"If you need to go to the dentist, we can—"

"You pull it up by the roots."

She thinks it's the first time she's seen him genuinely frown, his face seeming to age around the expression.

"I'm sorry to hear that."

~

It's not the first time Jiro's fought someone of a similar calibre to Present Mic, but she usually has the element of surprise on her side, and she's never been against anyone with a sound-based quirk like hers before. He's warier than the others about her earjacks, never letting her get close enough to attack him directly. When she tries to throw the sound of her heartbeat at him he just raises his voice over it, the force so strong that it feels like a physical blow as it hits her, making her ears pop and rattling her bones so hard that she's afraid they might shatter against each other.

Each time, she picks herself up a bit faster than before, gasping to get the air back into her lungs, and tries something new.

She plugs herself into an amp and points it at him, using both it and her quirk to amplify her heartbeats until the machine short circuits. She pretends to signal to an ally that isn't actually behind him. When one of his associates rushes her from behind, she reads his approach in the vibrations in the floor and whips around to grab his shirt at the last second. She pushes the two of men into one another in the hopes that it'll distract him, but he dodges and once again Jiro finds herself pinned to the ground under the weight of Present Mic's voice.

As Jiro lays there, face pressed flush to the oscillating cement, she thinks it's not a pair of cuffs she's going to leave in, it's a body bag. He pauses to take a breath, and before he can start shouting again she does the only thing left she can think of.

Her earjack plunges into the floor, and for a split second, she can feel the entire building with perfect clarity. Soft tremors still rock the walls from Present Mic's attack, and the people below have just begun fighting again, their movements sluggish and still half-reeling.

Present Mic shuffles closer to her, his approach casual and unhurried, and her heart thunders in her chest.

She pours the sound it up through her chest to her ears and then out into the cement, amplifies it, makes the floor bounce and crack beneath them—and then she's weightless as it falls out from under her.

The ground hits her hard, but she's good at running and she's on her feet in an instant, ignoring the cuts on her palms and the twinge in her ankle as she races to escape the rubble coming down around her. Clouds of dust obfuscate the already dim room, spotlights in the ceiling filtering rays of light through them.

She doesn't even see that Present Mic is right next to her until he's caught hold of her wrist.

As Jiro turns to face him, registering a hand on his belt where it rests on the curve of quirk-cancelling handcuffs, the world seems to slow. His chest expands as he sucks in a deep breath, grip on her impossibly tight, enough to snap her wrist.

And then an angry wall of fur and muscle bursts from the wreckage to their right, sending solid blocks of cement flying in all directions and roaring as it lunges straight at the hero. Present Mic's head swings over too late, and he's ripped away from her as a pair of massive, furry arms circle him and trap him down, one holding his arms while the other wraps around his throat, trapping his chin in place.

Jiro doesn't recognize him as Yamato until he turns to her and she feels his words tickling her skin. She can't hear his voice through the numb ringing in her ears, but she reads the word on his lips.

*Run.*

Jiro doesn't get a chance to respond.

More of her people rush out from the clouds of dust, pulling her out of the way at the same time that they rush the incapacitated hero. A woman that she recognizes but can't put a name to in the moment tugs at Jiro's hand and Jiro stumbles after her, dizzy and disoriented. It's only when she sees the broad pair of doors leading outside that she stops, pulling her hand away from the woman's.

The woman has a look of panic on her face as she turns back, and that's when Jiro recognizes her. Saya. They'd broken her out of her court hearing after she'd been framed for a murder that she couldn't have committed.

Saya says something to her that Jiro can't make out, but when she points to the door the meaning is clear.

"I can't leave!" It's hard to tell how loud she's speaking, but judging from the worn feeling of her throat, Jiro thinks she's screaming it. She turns back to look at the people still fighting around them, at the people they've left behind and Yamato's hulking figure, but isn't given more than a couple of seconds before Saya's palm on her cheek brings her gaze back forward.

Saya grimaces as she takes her hand back and sees blood coating her fingertips from Jiro's ears. Jiro's about to explain that she can't hear when the woman reaches for one of her earjacks and thrusts it into her throat, close to the larynx, where Jiro can feel her heartbeat strong and fast and the sound of her lungs expanding when she inhales. A chill goes through her as she feels all of the minuscule sounds and vibrations of the woman's body, so unexpectedly intimate that Jiro forgets herself.

And then Saya speaks.

"The war is only over when the general falls," she says, and Jiro feels the strum of Saya's vocal cords down to her very core, resounding through her ears and into her skull,

down through her bones and ligaments into her muscles and skin. Her words are low and rumbling, soothing like a massage—and so close that Jiro finds herself unable to breathe by the end of them.

Jiro's response is weak by comparison, lumbering as it leaves her mouth. "I'm not a general," she says, her eyes blinking wildly to stave the sudden burn of tears in them. "I'm only—"

She's only seventeen.

"You're our voice." Saya takes Jiro's hand again, as firm as her eyes are resolute. "You're our leader and we can't afford to let them have you."

Jiro can't find the words to respond to that, because it isn't as if she hadn't known. Her fans have been referring to her as their voice for more than a year, and she's always at the forefront of their activities, but the second she admitted it to herself she became responsible for all the people fighting under her name. As Saya pulls her once more through the crowd towards the open doors, Jiro looks behind herself again, watching the fights disappear behind clouds of settling dust. Bodies lay still on the ground, bathed in the orange-red light of the setting sun, and it's hard to tell if they're alive or dead.

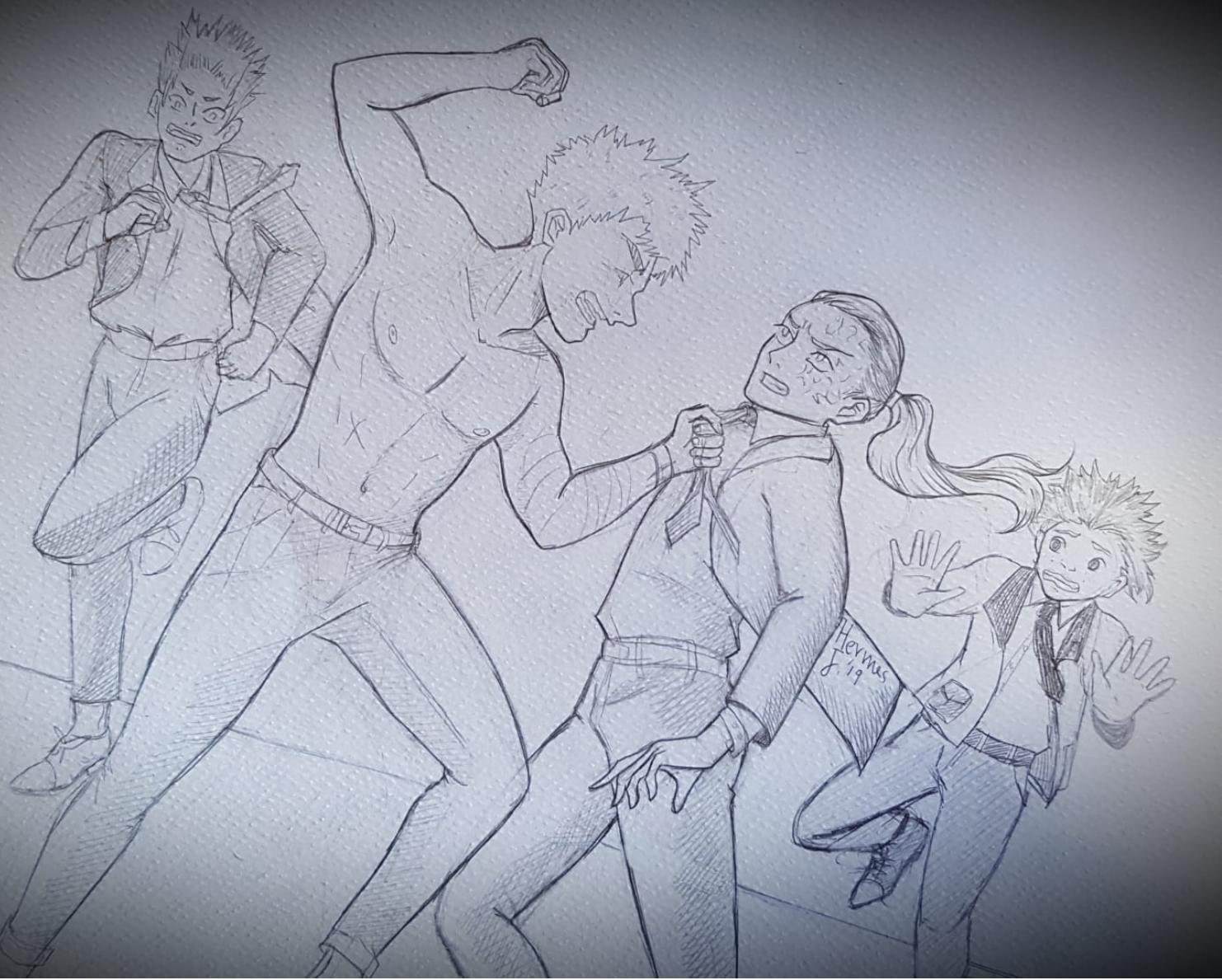
She doesn't struggle as she's taken out of the building, but she still can't bring herself to look away, even as Saya sprouts a pair of glowing wings and lifts them both in the air. From up high, she sees the scene in panorama: the line of heroes waiting to ambush the fleeing, the projectiles being shot up at them, the police vans, the flashing lights, the mixture of smoke and cement dust rising from the crumbling building, and the people lying broken against the gravel road.

It's easy to be strong in the heat of the battle, but now, as she spots Julie's body among a pile, as she watches Shion being led into a police van, as she sees all of the people who have died for her, it's hard to know that what she's doing is the right thing. Allowing the weight of it all crush her would be the easiest thing she's ever done.

Jiro watches them disappear into the horizon doesn't let herself despair.



EXPLOSIONBOI



## PARTNERS

by Taylor Smith

The room was tense, and Bakugou was doing all he could to not explode, quite literally.

They'd been sitting in the Todoroki family's conference hall, discussing different matters for what felt like forever. Bakugou's watch told him that it had only been three hours, but that was an eternity when discussing what the most successful front was going to be – ramen place or laundromat.

It didn't help that the boss' youngest and favourite son refused to make any meaningful input, having so far made two half-decent suggestions.

Half. That word summed up the bastard better than any other. Half his hair was snow-white, the other half a fiery red. Half his face was marked with a burn scar, the other half a soft pale. He also approached everything with half – half the ambition, half the heart, half the

mind. Bakugou didn't know what his deal was, but it pissed him off to no end. He was going to take over the entire Todoroki crime syndicate – one of the biggest in Japan – just because he had a good quirk.

"Sir Bakugou?"

He snapped out of his thoughts, looking up at one of the other bosses that had spoken to him.

"I think we can do both at once," he replied easily, "Use the laundromat as a hub and tradespot, use the ramen place as a laundering joint. We've got the funds to do both, and if we're smart, we can keep them separate enough to go unnoticed."

"It could work," another boss said, "But we've got to have different groups work on it."

"I agree," Endeavour spoke up. He turned to his son, "What do you think, Shouto?"

The boy stared at his father for a few moments before replying coldly, "Both will make money."

Endeavour sighed and pulled out a gold and ruby pocket watch from his suit.

"Well, gentlemen, I believe that's about as much as I can deal with today. Fuse, you look at properties on the north side of the city for ramen, Fujimoto, look for properties in the east for the laundromat."

"Yes, sir."

"You're dismissed."

Everyone in the room stood and bowed, beginning to make their way out or present their own matters to Endeavour.

Bakugou was more than happy to leave, and did all he could to not sprint out of the stuffy room.

He was one of the first out the door, walking into the marble hallway of the Todoroki estate, looking around for his bodyguard. He wasn't searching for long, as he appeared beside him and began walking out, waving back.

"Who the hell are you waving at?"

"Midoriya," Kirishima said cheerfully, "He says hi, by the way."

"Tell him to suck my dick."

"That bad, huh?"

Bakugou scowled, stuffing his hands in his pockets. His palms were starting to get sweaty and Endeavour had a very strict 'no quirk' policy in his house.

"You can tell me about it later," Kirishima said quietly, opening the door outside for him, "Once you've let off some steam."

"Good idea," Bakugou grumbled, heading to where his car was waiting. He wanted nothing more than to go home and destroy a few practice dummies.

A couple of hours later, Bakugou sat back in his desk chair and sighed.

While he was no crime lord, he had his own faction of Musutafu to run. He was slowly taking over the west section of the city, creating ties with Yoshida's men, making allies, planting spies. His specialty was analysis – he knew how people worked, and knew how to take advantage of their emotions. When he did eventually take over the west, he wouldn't have to worry about an uprising because the underlings would already be his.

But that took work. And lots of it. He had a lunch meeting with one of Yoshida's generals, Utsushima Camie, to discuss plans. She was a long-time friend and a valuable spy. Any information she had was crucial to his operation, but she often spoke in code and any professional conversation with her required homework.

"Tired?"

Bakugou looked at Kirishima, who was lounging in a chair by the door, flipping through a manga.

"Yeah," he admitted, pushing back from his desk, "I need a break."

"Sounds good to me," Kirishima said cheerfully, putting his book down and getting up, "Wanna watch tv?"

"Sure. You can choose."

"Really?" Kirishima asked as he opened the door, "Anything?"

"Put on anything remotely resembling a chick flick and you're fired."

"Are Disney movies acceptable?"

"Only the animated and pirate movies."

"Understandable."

Bakugou allowed himself to smile as they walked to the living room. He felt as though he was stressed constantly, watching every word that came out of his mouth, moulding his face into a mask. But at home, with Kirishima, he could be himself. He could watch Disney cartoons, could sing shitty karaoke, could talk about real feelings, could laugh and cry.

He could be happy.

Bakugou was rudely thrust from his thoughts as they opened the door to the living room, watching a familiar figure turn from where they stood, staring at the window. As he saw the blue eyes and the crooked grin, his heart dropped into his feet.

"Hey!" Kirishima yelled, stepping in front of Bakugou and hardening his arms, "Just who the hell are you? How'd you get in here?"

"I came down the chimney," he replied simply, turning to face them properly. He seemed at ease, hands in pockets, smiling.

"What do you want?" Bakugou demanded.

"You know him?" Kirishima asked, not taking his eyes off the intruder.

"This is Dabi. He works for Endeavour," was what he said. What he didn't say was that Dabi was a shadow. Only those in Endeavour's inner circle knew about their leader's chosen assassin.

Bakugou had met him once before, which is more than most people could say. It had been the day he was accepted into the inner circle. He'd helped Endeavour weed out a rat and was promised a seat at his table. But when the day came, he had found no extra chairs. He waited at the back of the room by the door, furious. He believed he'd been mocked, ridiculed after his hard work.

And then Dabi had come down the chimney.

He simply emerged from the fireplace, as though he'd been teleported there, covered in soot. With hardly a word, he walked over to the rat, and burned him alive right there in his chair.

The room had been alight with blue flames as the scent of burning flesh drifted across the table. Bakugou had seen many horrors during his time as a gang leader, but he'd never seen this.

He later found out who Dabi was, and that he only worked for Endeavour. He was only ever seen when someone was going to die.

So the fact that he was in Bakugou's living room was a bad sign.

"Kirishima," Bakugou said calmly, "Wait outside."

"But –"

"Just do it."

Kirishima looked at Bakugou, obviously trying to read him. Apparently he saw that

Bakugou was being deadly serious – as he was never this calm – and backed out of the room, the door clicking shut behind him.

"That was nice of you," Dabi commented.

"Did you come to kill me?" Bakugou demanded, never one for pleasantries, especially with someone potentially sent to assassinate him.

"Not today, no," Dabi replied with a shrug. Then he pointed at one of the chairs, "Mind if I sit?"

"Sure."

"Thanks."

"So if you're not here to kill me, why are you here?"

"I have a proposition for you."

Dabi reached into his overcoat and pulled out a thick envelope, miraculously clean. He held it out, and Bakugou took it after eyeing it over.

"You can open that only after I leave," Dabi said, "All the information you need is in there."

"What am I supposed to be doing?" Bakugou asked.

"All I know is that there's another rat," Dabi replied, "You've been tasked with finding them, deadline being two months from today."

"Two months?" Bakugou cried, "That's not enough!"

"Boss man said two months, you have two months," Dabi said with a shrug, "Take it up with him if you want, but I doubt he'll budge."

"Why didn't he just give this to me himself?"

"Top secret. Very few people know about it. And yeah, I suppose your bodyguard can know."

"Right."

"Oh, that reminds me," Dabi said, "your bodyguard, Kirishima Eijirou? He seems like a nice guy."

Bakugou had already been tensed up during the conversation, but the mention of Kirishima just pulled the strings even tighter, "Leave him alone."

"I will," Dabi assured, raising his hands as if in surrender, "So long as you find the leak within two months. If not, well..." Dabi laughed as he stood up, "I guess you start looking for a new bodyguard."

"Bastard," Bakugou growled, feeling his palms burning.

"Hey, don't shoot the messenger." Dabi shrugged and walked over to the fireplace in the room. As he stepped in he turned back to Bakugou.

"Oh yes, before I forget, you'll be working this case with Todoroki Shouto. Good luck."

Before he could react, there was a wave of blue flame and then Dabi was gone.

Bakugou screamed and launched a coffee table across the room.

The next afternoon, he waited impatiently for Todorki and his bodyguard.

"They're late..." he grumbled, pacing his office.

"Maybe they're stuck in traffic?" Kirishima suggested.

"They could fucking call. They've got what? Five phones between the two of them?"

"Uh...six, actually."

"Augh!" Bakugou yelled, a small explosion going off in frustration.

"Hey," Kirishima tried, walking over and grabbing the hand that just went off, "I know you don't like them, but why so tense?"

*Because your life is on the line.*

Yeah right, no way in hell would Bakugou tell Kirishima that. Beautiful dumb bastard would become selfless and over-involved and stressed. Bakugou needed Kirishima to be grounded. Perhaps it was selfish and shitty of him to not tell the love of his life that his life was in danger, but Bakugou had always been a selfish and shitty person.

Just then, there came a knock at the door.

"Todoroki Shouto here to see you, sir."

"Let 'em in," he said, taking a step back as Kirishima let go and clasped his hands behind his back. Professional.

The door opened and two of the people he despised most in the world stepped in – Todoroki Shouto, and old childhood rival Midoriya Izuku.

The door shut behind them and it was silent. Bakugou saw from the corner of his eye

that Midoriya and Kirishima smiled at each other.

"Let's just get this over with," Bakugou began, "I don't wanna be working with you, you don't wanna be working with me. I'm sure we were both forced into this, so the faster we get going, the faster we're done."

"Fine. What do you have so far?"

Bakugou scowled, "I've had less than 24 hours, and I'm a busy man. I've sent feelers out and read the files, not much aside from that. What about you, Boss Baby?"

Todooki frowned, "Don't call me that."

"Fine, Halfa. What do you have to bring to the table?"

"My men. Tell me where to send them, and they'll be there."

"You mean to tell me," Bakugou growled, "that you've done nothing since being handed this assignment?"

"Correct."

Bakugou gritted his teeth. This was going to be a shitty two months.

"You're not even fucking trying!"

"I assure you, I am."

"Not enough!" Bakugou yelled back, way past his boiling point, "It's almost been two weeks and we have nothing!"

"We'll figure something out."

"NO!" Bakugou spat, lunging forward and grabbing Todoroki's stupid tie, "I've had enough of your bullshit. Either help or don't, but lives are on the line and I am not about to let good people die because you can't be arsed to do something useful for once!"

"I'm being useful," Todoroki replied, "My men are at your disposal."

Tired of hearing that sentence, Bakugou didn't even think twice before sending off a small explosion in Todoroki's face.

Really just intimidation, not meant to hurt. But Todoroki recoiled and thrust his right hand forward, a blast of ice hitting Bakugou's arm. He raised his hands, ready to properly teach the bastard a lesson.

Okay, that's enough!"

Bakugou felt Kirishima's arms around him, pulling him back. He saw Midoriya rushing

in to Todoroki's side, checking on him.

"Get out," Bakugou snarled, "Get the fuck out of my house and don't come back!"

"Gladly," Todoroki snarled, storming out of the room with Midoriya behind him.

"What the hell, man?" Kirishima demanded, now letting go of him, his quirk dissipating, "You need to work together!"

"Fuck that," he snarled, "He can sip from a silver spoon and lay on his ass while me and his men do all the work."

"Whose life is on the line?" Kirishima asked then, "I heard what you said."

"We can't afford mistakes," Bakugou said, brushing Kirishima off, "We kill the wrong man and we pay for it." We pay for it with your life. I can't afford that.

"Get out."

"Kirishima let me in."

Bakugou sighed at his desk and rubbed his eyes. It was late at night and he was exhausted – he really didn't want to see Midoriya just then.

"Damn him. What do you want?"

"To talk," Midoriya said, coming and sitting at the chair across from Bakugou, "I know we don't really get along, but I think of you as my friend."

"Spit it out," Bakugou grumbled, "I'm tired and I wanna go to bed."

Midoriya sighed and started playing with a pen on the desk, "I know Kirishima's life is on the line. I haven't told him," he added quickly when he saw Bakugou's surprised expression, "it's not my place. But you're not the only one who cares about people."

"So what? You're Endeavour's bargaining chip?"

"No," Midoriya sighed, "Endeavour can't kill me – he thinks he can get to All Might through me."

"You haven't talked to him in years."

"I know," Midoriya said, in a tone that made it clear he didn't want to talk about it, "But..." Midoriya glanced around the room.

"It's not bugged," Bakugou said, "Say what you wanna say."

"Right well..." he took a breath, "Shouto never wanted to be in the mob."

"You're shitting me."

"I'm not!" Midoriya insisted, "The Todoroki home life is...bad, to say the least. Based off a quirk marriage, and Todoroki is his 'greatest success'."

"Jesus, I knew our boss was a flaming pile of trash, but I didn't think it was this bad," Bakugou admitted.

"Yeah, only the family and close friends know," Midoriya continued, "But yeah. Shouto doesn't want to be involved with all of this criminal activity, but his father holds Shouto's mom against him."

"I thought she went crazy so he stuck her in a mental ward."

"Sort of?" Midoriya said, "She had an emotional breakdown years ago, but he just puts her there so he can keep her and Shouto's interactions to a minimum, plus use her as a bargaining chip."

"If the bastard doesn't do what daddy says, mommy mysteriously dies," Bakugou guessed.

Midoriya sighed, "Yeah. It's why he even bothers at all. The two month deadline is because there's a really big deal going down that pretty heavily involves Endeavour himself – some weapons deal or whatever. Shouto is vehemently against it, but Endeavour gave him this assignment."

"Which is why he's only offering manpower." Bakugou sighed and ran his hands through his hair.

"We both know Kirishima is your weak point," Midoriya said, "I don't know why you don't hide your relationship with him."

"Never needed to until now – I'm a big boss with loyal followers. If anything, you should keep your relationship secret."

"We do!" Midoriya protested.

Bakugou raised his eyebrows, "You know that every single person in the inner circle knows, including Endeavour, right?"

Midoriya flushed, "Is it that bad?"

"Nah, they don't care. You both do your jobs, mostly. So, is the bastard actually going to help?"

"Yeah," Midoriya assured, "I talked to him before coming here. He's still not happy about it, but he knows what you're going through."

"Thanks" Bakugou mumbled, "If that's all, you can show yourself out."

"Always so polite," Midoriya teased as he stood, beginning to walk out, "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Wait," Bakugou said, suddenly realizing something, "The bastard is supposed to take over the syndicate. Once Endeavour dies, there'll be no one forcing him. What will happen then?"

"Just make sure you have an exit plan," Midoriya suggested, before walking out the door and disappearing.

The search did become easier after that.

Todoroki did have good insight, despite keeping quiet. Getting a suggestion from him was like pulling teeth, but it was an improvement.

It was still difficult, though. They weren't sure what exactly had been leaked, nor where it had even come from. With Endeavour's permission, they began to spread false info to their prime suspects, each lie different from the last. If one lie was leaked to police, they could trace it back to the source.

But nothing came up. No unusual police activity, no raids – nothing. All their prime suspects, cleared. The days were slipping away and they seemed no closer to plugging the leak.

Until one day.

Almost five weeks into their search, clues started popping up – meetings between police and a member of the Todoroki syndicate. Both Todoroki and Bakugou sent their men out for evidence, and came back with one clear target: Yoshita.

"The boss of the west city," Bakugou explained as they went over the evidence, "Close ties to Endeavour, lots of power to be gained in his deposition, high up enough to know details of the deal, but not involved with it himself."

"It's perfect," Todoroki said, shoving everything in a file and closing it, "We can be done, three weeks early."

"I dunno," Bakugou admitted, looking at the photos of Yoshita taken by hired eyes, "It seems almost too perfect, like the most obvious answer."

"You're saying it's like a trick question?" Todoroki asked.

"Exactly. What if Yoshita is being framed? I know him, and I know loyalty is one of his strongest values. He seems the least likely to betray someone, and it's convenient that he happens to be the prime suspect in a case I was given."

"Why would that matter?" Todoroki asked.

Bakugou grinned, "If he disappears, I become way more powerful. And there's one more thing..."

"What?"

"He never spread his rumour," Bakugou said, "We told him that Fuse – his rival – was about to be involved in a powerful trade deal with an outside source. If he is the rat, there is no way he'd miss out on such a good opportunity to get rid of his biggest rival."

"So who can it be?" Todoroki wondered.

"Hello boys."

They both whipped around to see Dabi stepping out of the chimney, brushing soot off himself, which sucked, since Bakugou just had the carpet cleaned.

"I see you're hard at work," Dabi noted, taking a peek at their notes.

"What do you want?" Todoroki asked icily.

"I came to tell you of a change in plans," Dabi answered, "When you find your rat, you present the findings to me."

"We were supposed to present them to Endeavour," Bakugou said, "His direct orders."

"His orders changed, as they so often do. You report to me, now."

Bakugou saw the smile on Dabi's face and all the pieces suddenly clicked into place.

"You," he realized, "You're the traitor."

Dabi scowled, "Please, why would I bother with that shit?"

"Because you think you deserve the syndicate."

Dabi turned to Todoroki, "I do, little brother. But that doesn't prove shit."

Bakugou wanted to ask about the little brother part, but felt that it wasn't the right moment.

"You planted evidence," Bakugou accused, "Yoshita being the traitor sweetens my pot but doesn't make sense otherwise. You're the rat."

Dabi stared them down or long enough that Bakugou began to question himself, but then he laughed.

"Alright, you got me. So, what're you going to do? Kill me?" He laughed again, "Sorry

"You want this syndicate?" Todoroki suddenly said, stepping forward, "It's yours."

Dabi narrowed his eyes, "You're joking."

"Nope. I don't want to be a part of this. You can take over and I can live in peace."

"...What's my half of the deal?"

Todoroki shrugged, "When the time comes, you can get rid of our trash."

Bakugou did not pretend to know what went on behind closed Todoroki doors, but he guessed it wasn't good. The two brothers seemed unwavering in their plan to kill their own father. As he watched the two shake hands, he understood their bond being not one of love, but of shared hatred.

"I won't tattle," Dabi said with a smile as he stepped back into the fireplace, "You can keep Yoshita as the traitor, I don't give a shit. Let's just hope I don't see you for a long time."

Then with a grin and a flash of blue flame, he was gone.

"What the actual fuck?" Bakugou breathed, still unsure as to what just happened.

"We just made a deal with the devil," Todoroki sighed, "I'm not looking forward to betraying him."

"You're seriously still gonna bring this whole thing down?" Bakugou demanded, "You have an out!"

"It's the right thing to do."

Bakugou wanted to argue, but knew it was pointless. Instead, he sighed, "Fuck. Fine. Just, like, gimme a damn one year heads-up before you burn your legacy to the goddamn ground."

Todoroki smiled and held out his hand, "It's a deal, friend."

"Fuck no, we're not friends."

"What about partners?"

Bakugou grinned and took Todoroki's hand, "I can live with that. Partner."





Pan-gyan

# TREASON

by Bunny

"Kaminari Denki, report."

His boss' voice is gruff, knocking him out of his daydream. He realizes that he hadn't really been listening to anyone else's reports, not that it particularly matters. Denki fixes his papers, looking down over them. Some are photocopies of profiles, others maps for classified locations that only UA is supposed to have access to. He sighs softly, standing up and moving to the front of the room where the projector is. He moves a map onto it, looking towards the screen.

"I was able to get this map of the training camp with the help of our other informant. It seems that Pro Hero team The Wild Wild Pussycats will be giving us our training, and even people who failed to pass the exam will be there, which means me, of course. I can't believe that I almost failed you in this aspect, but my partner wasn't particularly smart and I couldn't blow my own cover," he says. Denki sighs softly and rubs his temples at the thought. "Our dorms will be here and here, and the main courses of our training should be here," he explains, pointing at the different locations.

"As I said before, I think that Bakugo Katsuki is our best bet for recruiting someone from the class. He says he'd like to be a hero, but he's also not afraid to hurt someone if he needs to. He often shouts that he wants to kill people, and acts like a feral dog. If anyone could be convinced, I believe it will be him." Denki knows it's still a long shot, though. After getting to know Katsuki, he's realized that his undying passion for being a hero will be hard to waver, though he's still the most vulnerable in the class due to his violent tendencies.

"Everyone else in the class is just collateral damage if they get hurt, I don't think it'll be much of a problem if they ended up dead. In fact, I think it would damage UA's reputation more than a simple kidnapping ever could. If they can't even protect their students in a situation like this, what makes anyone think they could end up being heroes?" Denki smiles proudly as he finishes his report, turning over the map to Shigaraki before taking his seat once more. He zones out during everyone else's reports once more, not really caring about any of it. A plan to attack the training camp is drawn up, then everyone is dismissed.

Denki is anxious for them to get started. He's supposed to not only finally get away from UA, which is only a blessing because he's starting to get attached to some people, and he doesn't like that, but he's looking at a promotion within the League itself. That is, if this is all successful. He doesn't see how it wouldn't be, unless any of his dumbass teammates don't do their jobs.

By the time he's finally leaving for the training camp, he's beyond done with the wait. It was boring, he decides, just moving back and forth between his apartment and the League's headquarters, occasionally going out with some of the many people he, unfortunately, considers friends.

Denki feels personally attacked when they're kicked off the bus and forced to fight

their way through the forest. He can't use his electricity in the specialized way he developed to get it over with faster, not without drawing suspicion, and he can't command his classmates around him either. Izuku's plan annoys him, it's stupid and doesn't work well, but he doesn't say anything, just does his best not to electrocute himself stupid.

By the time they fight their way to the camp, he's completely fucking exhausted. That would be okay, if they weren't immediately told that in the future, they would be cooking their own food but that for tonight they're going to go easy on them and give them dinner. For some reason, that comment really gets on his nerves. He doesn't want to have to cook his own damn food, that's fucking ridiculous, they're all just children.

Denki waits for everyone to go to sleep that night, which takes a lot longer than one would think when Eijiro won't stop pestering Katsuki, forcing everyone else awake when he shouts in annoyance. He slips out of the cabin, looking around to make sure no one else is up before sliding into the shadows. He meets up with Shigaraki and Kurogiri, giving them a small run down of the nearby defences and which pros exactly are at the facility.

"I think our biggest issue is still going to be Eraserhead. His quirk is annoying and can stop any of us cold." Denki leans closer to see what he's written on the papers in the half light of the moon. "Shit, I can't even read what I wrote. Just make sure you guys don't fucking hit me tomorrow night, okay? I swear to god if I get stuck in a hospital with any of these pathetic little hero wannabes, I'm gonna hurl."

Shigaraki snorts and rolls his eyes. "Don't get in anyone's way, then. Just make sure you do your part keeping the failures off of our asses, alright?" he says, sighing. He hates that Denki is admittedly one of their smartest and most helpful assets, since he can be such a jackass at times. He takes the papers carefully, handing them over to his warp gate. "We'll see you tomorrow night. You had better keep your part." He turns and steps through the purple smoke.

Denki rolls his eyes, then heads back to the dorm, laying down. He feels like he's only slept for a few moments before getting tugged awake by Aizawa for some extra training. Training he doesn't need. Training that is stealing his precious sleep away. It's all the more annoying when he finds out he's here because he failed the entrance exam. He rubs his eyes and yawns, following the rest of the group out. He works through everything they're told to do. It's exhausting to pretend to be this cheerful this early in the morning, he feels like he wants to scream.

When they're released to work on their individual quirks, he uses a few of his newer skills under the guise of 'practice' and acts like he just learned it when asked about it. He makes sure not to get into the incredibly fancy stuff he learned. He whines alongside the rest of the failures when he hears he won't get to 'test his courage' with the rest of his class. He pouts, then shrugs it off. The attacks will be happening soon, he knows it. He wasn't sure exactly when, but it's going to happen. His master plan will have been pulled off, and he'll be promoted within the ranks of the League for sure.

The class with Aizawa and Vlad King is incredibly boring. He rests his head on his arms and sighs softly, only half listening to another long speech from his home room

teacher. When the announcement comes to all of them, his hands crackle with electricity. He's excited, though he controls his face to make himself seem anxious. He notices Eijiro seems particularly antsy. He shifts, feeling more electricity crackle over his hands.

When Aizawa leaves, he finds it even more difficult to pretend to be worried. He looks at Eijiro, closing his hands around his fists to calm the electricity when the boy gives him a gentle, comforting smile.

"It's gonna be okay, Den. There's nothing to worry about, because the pros are on their way and they've got us." Eijiro pats his shoulder as he says it, then lets go to wait for more news. Denki nods a little bit, as if he needed that and it's an incredible relief to hear.

"I'm sorry, Ei," he whispers. He isn't sure why he says it, but he does. Eijiro turns to give him a confused look just before Denki shocks the whole classroom, knocking even the teacher on his ass. The shock was intentionally big enough to knock them all out, and he sneaks out the back while Aizawa is fighting one of the more powerful of his colleagues.

Denki is careful as he stalks through the woods, ignoring the cries of his classmates as he dodges between the trees, looking for one in specific. The one he's gained the trust of, but also the most useless one in class. He needs to get rid of him, so that Aizawa will be able to open up a place for that one kid with the insane mind control quirk. He can't even imagine taking out one of the other people, people he reluctantly considers friends. Sometimes, he feels a flicker of guilt at the fact that he risks their lives, but he suppresses it now as the head of his target comes into view.

"Mineta," he whispers, sliding down into his hiding spot beside him. "Where are the others?" Denki asks, practised panic lacing his voice.

"I don't know! I hid here because some crazy villains appeared and I can't fight them! We can't fight them, we need more pros or something," Mineta responds, voice high with real panic. The sound makes Denki's heart pound with excitement. Cause this kind of stir in someone is something he completely forgot he loved.

Denki shifts, hiding his smile behind his hand. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a pair of gloves. "Don't worry, Min. It'll all be over soon enough and the pros are definitely on their way," he says. He slides a knife from his pocket, smiling at the way it shines in the moonlight. "Look over there, I think it's Aizawa sensei," he says, trying to get him to turn away. Not that he's going to have any difficulty looking at his face, no, it'll just be cleaner, no blood spatter on himself.

As soon as Mineta turns his back, then knife is drawing across his neck. It's deep enough to send a spray of blood across the trees and brush in front of them. He had almost avoided it all together, but he forgot to consider the blood that might drip from Mineta's lips, and thus ended up with stained gloves. Denki sighs in irritation, pushing his body away and dropping the knife. Now he has to hide the stupid gloves, he can't risk anyone seeing him. If Katsuki doesn't agree to become a villain, he's going to have to try for the little mind controlling monster from general.

Denki listens to the wet, choked gasps Mineta makes as he feebly tries to breath despite not really being able to, and he can't help but smirk. The blood spreading over the dirt fills him with an odd feeling he's rarely felt before, and he wonders if he should feel disgusting about being so excited. This is certainly not his first kill, but it's definitely his favourite. It was so sickly easy, killing someone who trusts him so. He hears someone nearby and scrambles away through the trees, throwing the dirtied gloves away, into a nearby thicket. He desperately hopes that they won't be found.

He can't afford that kind of screw up.

Denki skirts the thick fog, knowing damn well what it could do to someone, and finds his way to where some of his group is meeting up. He stays out of sight, wanting to be able to escape with the rest but still trying to stay out of sight. Everyone here knows his quirk and his weaknesses, and they would be able to take him down if he was perceived as a threat, it's a chance he can't take. He can hear Midoriya's voice, crying for Katsuki. He hates that kid, he's such a pain in the neck and so completely and totally in the way at all times.

Who could even love Katsuki as much as Izuku does? How does that happen? It's like he sees something no one else could ever see in the explosive boy. Maybe Eijiro could see it too. Denki doesn't know he ever could see anything like that. He's so mean, so cruel. He acts like a villain while maintaining hero status. It's not like he'd be the first, but it's so frustrating that Katsuki gets away with it while in the public eye, as if it's perfectly normal to threaten to murder people, to bully your classmates, with no repercussions.

Sometimes Denki wonders which of them is truly a villain. Sometimes, when sickly smell of blood isn't clogging his nose.

Maybe the difference is that Katsuki is too much of a coward to actually follow through with his words. Maybe making children cry is the worst he could ever do.

A dog that is all bark and no bite.

Maybe being quietly evil is worse than being outwardly mean but unable to follow through.

When Denki hides behind a tree near his group and looks at his hands, he almost swears there's blood smeared on his fingers, but there can't possibly be. Guilt wells up in his chest and he panics as he wipes his hands on his clothes, desperate to remove the non-existent liquid. It almost feels sticky, almost makes him believe it's truly there. His voice dies as he turns to ask a teammate their opinion. Himiko is running her stupid mouth again, and he can't even try to talk over her.

He's being pulled through the portal suddenly, and it feels like he's being engulfed with smoke. His lungs were already struggling to pull in air, and now he's coughing and laying on the ground of the bar they use as their hideout. It's embarrassing, he realizes vaguely, that he's acting this way in front of his weaker colleagues.

Denki finally grounds himself. Finally breathes properly.

Then stands up and walks from the room into the back. He knows Katsuki probably saw him already, but would he even say anything? When it comes down to it, would Katsuki talk to him first, or just go right to the authorities? He knows what he hopes he will do if he needs it. Katsuki, despite barely having a brain sometimes, usually talks to people before going to any adults. Even then, he's noticed a trend of him not asking for help from authorities. It's one of the things he thought might make Katsuki a good villain, might make him more vulnerable to being manipulated by his boss.

It feels like only minutes have passed but it must have been hours when suddenly heroes come bursting into the facility. He pokes his head from the back room, watching as first Tomura is pulled away by a warp ability he's never seen before, then the rest of his team has disappeared along with Katsuki, leaving him alone in the back of the bar. A hero catches sight of him, and he cowers away, whimpering as if he was just another kidnapped student from UA.

Somehow he was forgotten by his boss.

Or maybe he wasn't. In a thoughtful attempt to maintain his innocence, perhaps his boss left him behind to act like someone who was kidnapped. He feels like a terrified child, staring up at the pro heroes with fear, hands shaking horribly.

Is it really faking it when he's this scared?

He's swept away in the madness and taken to the hospital. After a couple more hours of watching an incredibly stressful fight, Katsuki is also brought to the hospital to get looked over. He looks up when Katsuki comes into his room and gets a little scared, fingers clenching into the sheets.

"H-Hi, Katsuki," he whispers, biting his lip softly.

Katsuki gives him a dark look, shutting him up effectively. "Why the fuck were you there?" he growls, voice low. "I haven't fucking told anyone yet, but you better have a good explanation for all this shit, otherwise I'm gonna kick your ass ten ways to next week then turn your fucking ass in, got it, Pikachu?" he snaps.

Denki rubs the sheets between his fingers. He has the lie on the tip of his tongue, it's the one he made up when they first approached him for being a spy in UA. "My parents were kidnapped by the League and they told me if I didn't help them and do exactly what they said they'd kill my parents," he whimpers, voice trembling and eyes full of tears. He's practised this in the mirror a million times. It's going to take a lot to fool someone as perceptive as Katsuki, he knows that, and he so he does his best to hide anything that would give him away. Real tears dripping down his cheeks seal the deal, ones from the stress of the evening.

He's not sure he wants to do this any more.

Can he even back down? Would it even be an option? There's nothing he wants more

than to just relax and be friends with the kids in 1-A. Everyone has been so kind to him and good to him and even the thought of hurting anyone again has him breaking down further. He doesn't know if he can stay in the League now, not with how real everything has suddenly become.

To his surprise, Katsuki's arms are suddenly around him, holding him, and his voice is barely breaking through his thoughts to reassure him that everything is okay.

Is everything okay, now? Probably not.

It's only a few days before he suddenly has pro heroes on his doorstep, requesting to speak with his parents. What is he supposed to say to that? He's lived alone almost his whole life.

"I'm sorry, they're not here right now. They both work during the day. Can I help you with something, though?" he asks. He gets informed that they're requesting all the students move to a nearby dorm, which he agrees to almost immediately. Not having to pay for his little apartment any more would be a blessing in and of itself. Then he can hold all his money to himself and get anything he wants.

Moving into the dorm is easy enough. He doesn't have much, and he has to hide some of it in a storage unit so he doesn't risk his classmates coming across it.

Everything is fine, until it's not any more. Until he's coming across the memorial for Mineta that the school set up. He freezes up, breath catching in his throat and tears automatically welling into his eyes. All he can think about is the way it felt to have his hot, wet blood pour over his fingers and the horrible scent of it. The body slumping against him.

Oh god he's just a kid and he did that shit, he's already killed someone, how is that even fair? How did he even get into this situation? When did he decide that he would be better off a villain than someone who helps people?

It must have been when he lost his parents.

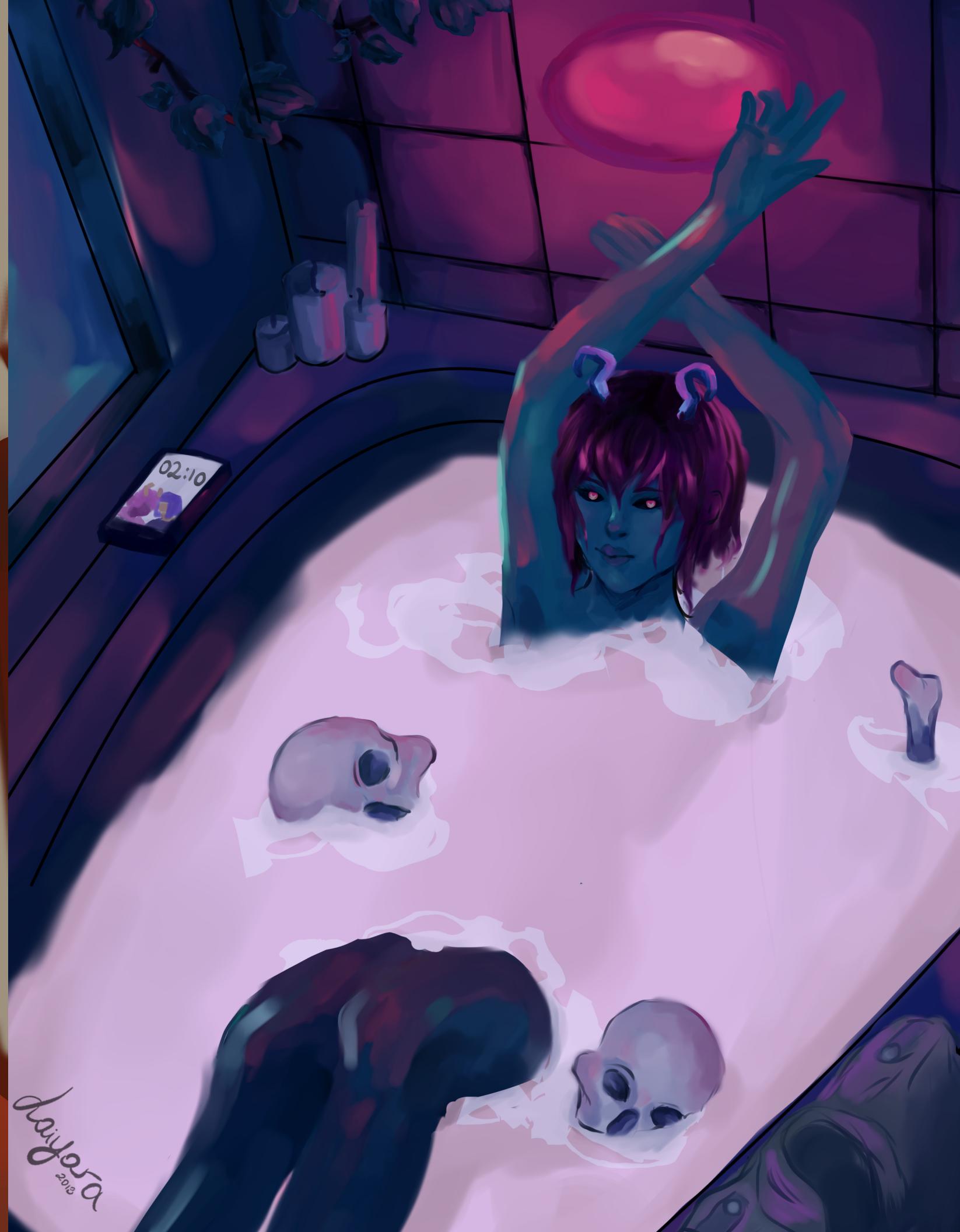
But he won't think about that now.

Warm arms wrap around him and squeeze him close, and he doesn't feel like he deserves their comfort, not after what he did. He sniffles softly and buries his face against them, gripping them close. After a few moments, he realizes it must be Jirou, she's always there for him. Always. Even when he doesn't deserve it.

He should never have done it.

But it's too late for regret now, even if he were to pull away from the League they would continue to destroy his classmates, so for now, he's just going to have to keep hurting them.

It's too late to be a hero.





# CATALYZE

by Achieving Elysium

Villains aren't born from nothing.

Defeating villainy, facing it—Shouto knows that it's not just the end of the road but the beginning of it. Like tracing the roots of a tree to search for its heart.

The facts are this: Todoroki Enji made a sudden turn down the path of villainy. The world has lost a hero. Shouto has lost a father.

The stories speculate. The people are left shaken. What no one else realizes is the line between hero and villain is razor-thin, and somewhere along it lies the fork in the road. And Todoroki Shouto is the beginning.

## i. the fall

### BREAKING NEWS: Endeavor, Villain?

*Just yesterday, a large fire broke out at the Jet Hero Agency. Concerned, heroes and first responders rushed to the scene, only to be confronted with the number two hero, Endeavor.*

*But Endeavor wasn't there to help. Now-former pro hero Endeavor, who continuously and tirelessly served the public for over twenty years, declared he was a hero no longer, and challenged All Might to face him before leaving the surrounding area burning in flames.*

*Close to fifty people were injured in the fire, though there were no casualties. The Hero Commission has already sent out an emergency alert and stripped Endeavor of his pro hero status, confirming and declaring Endeavor a villain. The news comes as a shock to all of Japan, and has even broken international news.*

*What comes next, no one is sure. Local heroes are working hard to rally support as the number three hero, Best Jeanist, steps up in Endeavor's place. There has been no sign of Endeavor since the incident, and his motivations remain unclear, though many theorize Endeavor's desire to surpass number one hero All Might may have been the cause. For now, Japan waits for what Endeavor will do and if he continues on his rampage, but it is up to the pro heroes and law enforcement to apprehend him.*

*Both All Might and the Todoroki family have declined to comment on Endeavor's sudden turn.*

The day before the fire, Endeavor talks to Shouto. It's an innocuous enough conversation, one that isn't very far from the usual. Shouto doesn't find anything strange; later, he wonders if he should have.

"Shouto."

Shouto keeps his face neutral. He clasps his hands behind his back, trying to stop them from shaking as Endeavor paces back and forth in front of him.

"You wanted to see me," he says, then flatly adds, "Father."

Father is a word that has never tasted quite right in his mouth, like thick oil coating his tongue. Shouto feels like he's lying every time he says it. He stares at a spot on the floor and watches Endeavor's feet pass every few seconds.

He's angry. Shouto can tell. It's obvious by the way he's about to walk a hole in the floor—Fuyumi, he knows, will be upset—but Shouto hears the roiling anger in his voice. Out of the corner of his eye Shouto sees the barest flicker of flames.

He's definitely angry.

"What are you doing?" Endeavor roars. Fire pulses in front of him, and Shouto forces himself to still even though he just barely flinches. Ice creeps up the back of his hand, but he wills it away.

"I don't know what you mean."

Just a little longer. Endeavor won't hurt him, so all Shouto has to do is look forward, nod in agreement, and flee as soon as he's able. He'd gotten home earlier than usual from U.A. to find Endeavor waiting for him and his siblings nowhere to be seen. Only the two of them. Dangerous.

Endeavor stops right in front of him. A rough hand grabs Shouto's chin and forces it upward so they look each other in the eye.

"I said," Endeavor growls, "what are you doing, Shouto?"

Shouto juts his jaw out defiantly but says nothing otherwise. He doesn't know what Endeavor means, or what he wants. He's determined not to give anything away. Fire flickers around his face. Shouto can feel the heat of it.

"You're not strong enough!" Endeavor snaps. Shouto flinches this time. "You're not strong enough. You're not good enough, Shouto, and I want to know why."

"I'm learning," Shouto says, trying to placate him. "You know I'm powerful. I just—"

But he stumbles, misses a beat, and Endeavor snatches it from him like a bird does prey.

"Just what?" Endeavor lets him go, and Shouto stumbles backward. "You didn't win the Sports Festival, Shouto. And when I asked, you aren't even the top of your class. If you were really my son, you wouldn't be like this."

*If you were really my son, you wouldn't be like this.*

Shouto doesn't cry. He's never really cried, only a few times, because he learned Endeavor didn't like it. He's not like Izuku, who cries freely, his heart always on his sleeve. Shouto keeps his locked up inside.

The first time he cried, that was what Endeavor said. Face wet, hands bruised, his fire uncontrollable. Shouto cried as his flames died out; he hadn't been able to do what his father wanted.

*If you were really my son, you wouldn't be like this.*

"If you were really my son—" Endeavor cuts himself off and turns away. He slams heavy hands on the table, the impact resonating, and bellows wordlessly to the other wall.

"Father..."

"Don't speak to me," Endeavor spits. His shoulders heave. When Shouto was young he thought his father was the strongest hero in the world, looking up at the broad plane of his shoulders, at the way fire curls around him. Now, years later when Shouto sees the same sight he just sees someone desperate and hungry. There is no tightness around his ribs, no skin clinging to bone, but the hunger is inside of him. Tearing at him. At his heart.

"May I be excused?" Shouto murmurs. He doesn't dare leave without permission, but he's already a half-step closer to the door. He presses his left foot back, then his right again, watching carefully.

Endeavor turns. Meets his eyes.

This is the last thing Endeavor will say to him before the fire. This is the last piece of his father that Shouto ever gets, and it is not pretty, and it hurts though Shouto thinks he's heard it a hundred times before.

This is the last thing Endeavor will say to him before the fire. But after the conversation, Shouto flees to the bathroom, locks the door as best as he can, and cries though he doesn't know why yet.

This is the last thing Endeavor will say to him before the fire.

"You disappoint me, Shouto."

## ii. good grief

One (1) new message:

*To listen, press 1.*

One.

*"Hello? Shouto, it's me. I know you must be very busy right now, but I really wanted to*

*call you after... after. The police have already spoken to me—I'm not in any trouble because I know you'll worry, but they've determined Endeavor was acting outside of any influence from his family. For now I'm being moved to a secure location. They won't let me tell you where it is yet, but they said I could call you before I go. Hopefully you and your siblings will be able to join me here.*

*"I wish I could see your face right now, Shouto. I'm sorry. I didn't... I didn't know this was going to happen. I didn't realize your father—it must be so hard. I know you looked up to him.*

*"I just wanted to tell you something. I love you, Shouto. And I know you... it's not your fault, and it was never your fault. Please call me back soon. I'll let you know if you can visit sometime."*

*End message. To hear this message again, press 1. To delete this message, press 2.*

Two.

Shouto hefts his bag higher on his shoulder. The safe house is exactly as his mother described, cool and plain, nothing remarkable. He supposes that's the point of it—to hide in plain sight, though Shouto knows it's more secure than it looks.

He's escorted in discreetly by security. Once he's inside, the guard remains by the door on vigil. Shouto slips off his shoes and finds a set of soft slippers to put on, then pads through the empty house.

The first thing he notices is that it's small. Home—if it can be called that—is much larger, a flaunt of Endeavor's wealth, and well-decorated if not very comfortable. Here Shouto sees simplicity. A vase of flowers on the dining room table. A painting hanging on the whitewashed walls. He explores carefully, running his finger over furniture.

"Shouto!"

He turns. It's not Mother, though he almost thinks it is—it's Fuyumi instead, wide smile on her face. She's got a book clutched in her hand, and her glasses are slightly askew.

Shouto relaxes. He hasn't seen his sister in a while, and he lets her gently wrap him in a quick hug before tugging him to a different room. Spacious and bright, a row of plants line the far wall beneath a set of tinted windows. Mother's seated on a couch, eyes distant, but when they walk in, she turns and smiles brightly.

"Shouto," she says. Shouto bows in greeting.

"Mother," he responds.

They look at each other for a moment before Mother stands, hurrying towards the

kitchen. She returns bearing a tea set, and Shouto takes the tray from her to put on the small side table by the couch.

"Fuyumi, tea?"

"Huh?" Fuyumi says, then pauses on a page. "Oh. Yes, please."

He pours them each a cup, passing one to Mother first, then asks where Natsuo is and if he's coming. Running late, he's told.

"As usual," Fuyumi says, and she and Mother laugh at a joke that Shouto does not understand. He crosses to the lone armchair across from the two of them and perches in it.

"I got your call," he says quietly, folding his hands over each other so they don't see him trembling. "The message you left me. Thank you."

"Oh, Shouto." Mother comes and kneels down in front of both of them. There is an easy grace that has always come naturally to her, but there's tension, too. "I'm sorry."

"Mom..." Fuyumi says, taking Mother's hand.

Shouto doesn't move. He feels stiff and wooden and unwelcome. He doesn't know how he's supposed to act here. And he doesn't know how to be—this, them, family. The feeling is foreign.

"Did you speak with Detective Makato, too?" Fuyumi asks, when no one says anything. Shouto shakes his head.

"Tsukauchi," he tells them. All Might's friend. He'd felt terrible the entire time, and he knows Detective Tsukauchi is a human lie-detector—not that Shouto had anything to say to him but the truth. *I don't know why he did that. He didn't say anything. I don't know.*

Detective Tsukauchi paused. Like something wasn't quite reading right. Shouto thinks it's because he wasn't telling the entire truth—I don't know why he did that is not necessarily a lie, but Shouto knows Endeavor thought of his son when he started the fire.

They talk for a few minutes about the police investigation into Endeavor. Ugly but necessary. The public outcry. Shouto tells them how he was crowded by swaths of reporters and even a few upset civilians when he'd gone to school yesterday, though thankfully Aizawa-sensei had intervened.

"He's kind," Shouto says, "though he might not always seem like it."

Before they walked into class, Aizawa-sensei stopped him and said, it doesn't matter what your father does or doesn't do. To me, you are my student, and you will be a hero. And then, he doesn't deserve you.

Shouto doesn't say any of that. He doesn't quite believe the words yet, so he keeps

them instead.

"I'm glad you have someone to support you when I'm not there," Mother murmurs. "I wish I could have seen this coming..."

"It's not your fault," Shouto says. And he believes that, even if it comes out like he doesn't.

"And it's not either of yours," Mother says, looking between them. She takes his hand and squeezes it tightly, her touch warm but her skin cold. "I know it's difficult right now. But we need to keep going."

"We have each other. I think that's enough." Fuyumi's eyes are dark. She smiles wobbly at them and slides off the couch to wrap Mother into a hug. Mother puts one arm around his sister and beckons to him, so he kneels down to and feels her put the other arm around him. Safe. Soft. So different from what he's used to, but welcome.

He puts his head down on Mother's shoulder, and she lifts her hand to stroke his hair.

"Shouto, you are so strong," she whispers in his ear. "I'm so proud of you."

### iii. see it all burn

*The clip plays. The reporters clamber over each other, shouting out questions as All Might steps out in costume, a smile painted grim on his face. He lets them shout, then holds up a hand.*

*"First I'd like to apologize and welcome you to this last-minute press conference." There aren't any notecards in All Might's hands. No cues. Two minutes prior he stopped a train crash on the rails.*

*"As everyone may be aware, three days ago, the former number two hero and my colleague, Endeavor started a large fire that spread and destroyed many buildings, though there were no deaths thanks to the quick response of local heroes and policemen. He is now classified as a dangerous villain, so it is important for anyone with information to come forward. But that is not the point of my presence here today."*

*All Might appears, as he always does, calm and composed. The ever-present smile is reassuring. A good way to face the public.*

*"After the incident, Endeavor seemed to address and challenge me personally as the number one hero. Having worked with him before, I was aware of a natural competition as high-ranking heroes, but it is difficult for all of us to realize that perhaps that ambition that even I admired ran much deeper than previously thought. Enough for Endeavor to want to defeat me not as a hero, but as a villain.*

*"I want to apologize to everyone as the cause of the problem and thank you for your support as we search for Endeavor's whereabouts and attempt to address this tumultuous*

*We must rely and believe in each other even now. As for the threat that Endeavor poses and the challenge he has issued, I will do my best to protect and shield others from him, and face him as is my duty. To close, I wish to extend my sincere sympathy for the Todoroki family, thank them for their cooperation, and hope for their health and happiness following these events.*

All Might steps down from the podium. Lights flash. He smiles blindingly at the cameras, but then waves in departure as people flock to ask him questions. All Might simply shoulders his way through the crowd.

*"I am not accepting any questions following this brief. Thank you for attending."*

*Then he's gone.*

Everything changed the moment Endeavor lit the first flame. Shouto understands that now, stepping through the halls of U.A. People stare and whisper behind his back. Shouto hears every rumor and word.

"Shouto!" Izuku's right by Class 1-A, Uraraka next to him. They wave, and Shouto lifts a hand hesitantly as Izuku breaks through the crowd.

"Izuku," he greets, "Uraraka. It's good to see you."

"You, too," Uraraka says cheerily, a genuine smile on her face. She's always been kind. "We're so glad you're back. Everyone was worried about you."

"Yeah, everyone's going to be happy to see you. Even Kacchan."

"Maybe not," Uraraka concedes, and Shouto smiles despite himself.

"It was just a day or two I couldn't attend," he says, "they just wanted to make sure it was safe, that's all. There shouldn't be any issue going forwards."

"Oh, well that's good," Uraraka says as they walk into class. "Oh! Right! Deku, you got all the notes, right?"

Izuku fumbles in his backpack, but finds a folder and holds it out.

"Ah—thank you."

And the day continues just like any other. None of his other classmates make any fuss or commotion, which Shouto appreciates. A few of them quietly give him their support, which is nice. But it's still a little overwhelming to be back, so Shouto asks to go see Recovery Girl after lunch and departs to somewhere quiet.

It's bright outside. Shouto sits on a bench, only a little guilty about skipping class; he's never done it before, so this is his first. Even that, he supposes, is Endeavor's fault.

He's not alone for long, though. A large figure makes its way through the grounds and stops in front of him. Shouto looks up into All Might's smiling face.

"Young Todoroki," All Might says, "may I?"

Shouto nods.

"You don't have to spend time with this old man if you don't like," All Might continues, "I'm afraid things might be a bit strained between us. I saw you and thought we might have a talk."

"Right. What about? Endeavor?"

"Yes and no. About you, young Todoroki." All Might puts a hand on his shoulder and squeezes. "You're a bright young man with a promising future ahead of you, and I don't want any bad blood between your father and I to reflect in what I think you can become."

"I wanted to be a hero," Shouto says, "but he pushed me a lot, too. He always wanted to—make me strong. Strong enough so that I could... defeat you. I'm sorry. That's not what I want. I want to help people."

"I know." All Might kneels down in front of him and extends a hand. When Shouto doesn't pull away, All Might wraps his arms around him in a gentle hug.

Endeavor would have never done this, he thinks. Endeavor is not gentle or kind; he has never been, and he never will. Shouto blinks with his face pressed to All Might's shoulder and finds himself comforted.

"It's not your fault," All Might tells him, pulling back. He puts his hands on Shouto's shoulder and looks him right in the eye. "It's not your fault."

He can't look away, and the words slip out even though he doesn't mean them to. "It is."

Faint alarm rings All Might's eyes. "What your father chose..."

"I wasn't good enough," Shouto says, and blinks back tears. "If I'd been good enough he would have never been a villain. But he just wants to win."

"He's not good enough for you," All Might says, squeezing his shoulder again. "You'll see, one day."

"Can I go with you?" Shouto blurts. He bites back the words as All Might blinks in surprise. He shouldn't have said that, but it's too late to take them back. He elaborates. "I want to fight."

"Endeavor?"

"He challenged you," and the words are spilling out now, all the things Shouto wanted

to say but never got to. "But he's my father, and what he's doing is wrong, and I want to help stop him."

"It's dangerous—"

"I know."

All Might sighs. "I'm sorry, young Todoroki. You know—as a hero, as a teacher... as someone who cares about you, I cannot let you fight him. I don't want him to hurt you more than he already has."

But hasn't Endeavor spent years sending lances through Shouto's heart? Hasn't Endeavor been the cause of the littered cuts on Shouto's hands as he hit the ground during training, the bruises on his back? Hasn't Endeavor already taken his childhood from him?

"Is there anything I can do?" All Might asks. "For you or your family. I'd like to help you."

"Then stop him for me," Shouto says. He lifts his chin. Ice soothing over burns. "That's the only thing I need."

#### iv. fall, again

*Grainy video footage from above. Smoke drifts in plumes, obscuring the camera's view as the low hum of a helicopter pulses in the background. Through the darkness, pockets of light appear—bursts of orange and red flame.*

The smoke clears, and the camera zooms on two figures fighting. Brawling through the city, All Might sends Endeavor back with a reeling punch. Smoke billows around him, and fire races back. A dangerous fight.

They crash through a building. Then another.

Locked in a stronghold, Endeavor pushes forward. His fire burns brighter and brighter until it's nothing but a smear of glowing white on the camera, and then he forces All Might back.

One step. Then two. A third, as the ground cracks under All Might's feet.

The camera shakes, then goes black.

Shouto is running through the city, armed with ice. Jagged spikes of it form on his arm, spiralling up his side as he pushes through the smoke. His eyes sting, but he covers his mouth and pushes through.

The wreckage is nearly unbelievable. It's a miracle the heroes managed to evacuate everyone as Endeavor appeared, followed only mere minutes by All Might. Shouto saw the news, then the live footage shared online. When he saw All Might stumble, he ran.

There's the sound of exploding concrete in the distance, so Shouto pushes further into the battlefield and runs toward the sound. In the distance he sees All Might, and a bright epicenter that can only be Endeavor.

Endeavor strikes right at All Might's heart. All Might blocks, but Endeavor grabs his arm as fire burns. There's a choked cry before All Might retaliates, and Shouto's heart leaps in his throat as he races toward them. Just days ago, Shouto was the beginning of the fall. He readies himself, steps over cracks in the street and strides forward with his head held high. Now he is the end of it.

"Why?" All Might shouts over the blood roaring in Shouto's ears. "Stop this, Endeavor!"

Endeavor appears, rising from the ashes. There's blood on his face as he grits his teeth. He yells wordlessly, and even from far away Shouto can feel the heat.

"I'll take you down, All Might," Endeavor snarls, wiping blood from his mouth. He lunges forward, All Might bracing for impact—ice.

Cold and crystalline, it sinks across concrete, rooting itself in the ground and crackling as it swallows Endeavor. It's melted in an instant, but a burning gaze turns in Shouto's direction.

Shouto clenches his fists. Ice forms again as the heat presses in threateningly.

"Todoroki—" All Might gasps. He flicks his hand. Another sheet of ice that Endeavor breaks through, and Shouto narrows his eyes.

"Hello, Father," he says, and comes to stand next to All Might. They face each other. For the first time, Shouto looks Endeavor in the eye.

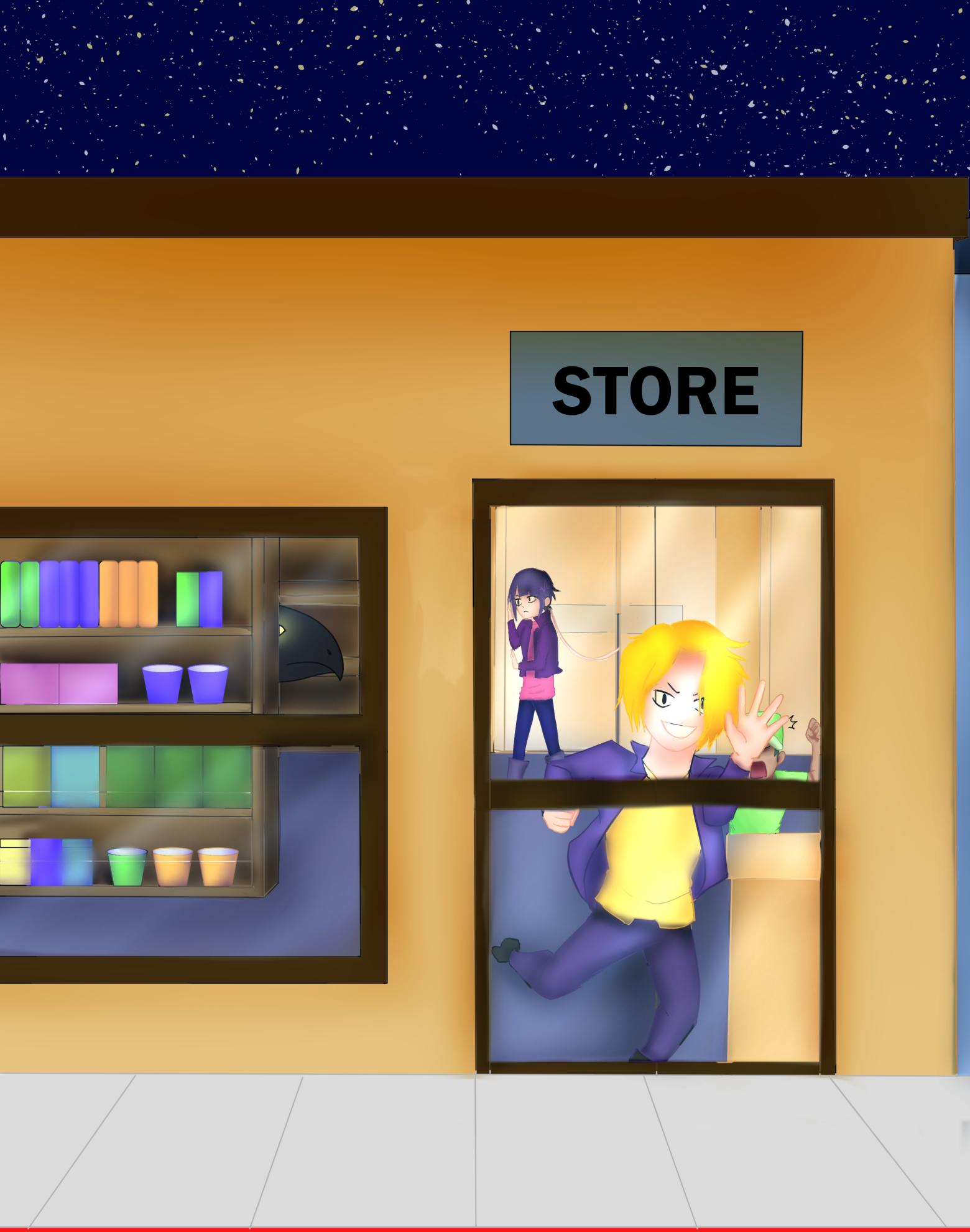
"Shouto..."

"Don't call me that," Shouto says, and he thinks of all the people who said, it's not your fault. You are better than him. He is not good enough for you. "You don't deserve to." Ice flicks out, gleaming and sharp. Shouto straightens his shoulders and stands on the opposite side of his father.

*If you were really my son, you wouldn't be like this.*

"I'm happy to disappoint," Shouto says, tilting his head. "Would you like to see what I'm really capable of?"





# DECONSTRUCTION

by Amuk

"I could attack you," Nejire threatened, taking a menacing step forward. A familiar drain ran through her arm as the tip of a golden spiral emerged from her hand. "I should attack you."

"But you won't." In the shadows of the hospital parking lot, Kurogiri stood calmly. His arms lay relaxed at his side, his black mist of a head watching her more with curiosity than fear. In his black vest, he looked more like an inconvenienced businessman than a villain. "Otherwise, my friends will attack the hospital."

It could be a bluff. While there was no way this was a chance meeting, she doubted they'd risk attacking a facility filled with heroes, injured or not. Yet Mirio was inside and without his quirk, he couldn't protect himself. If what Izuku had said about his meeting with Shigaraki was true, then all she had to do was listen and he'd leave. Nejire relaxed her arm, turning off her quirk, and glared at the villain. "What do you want?"

"To talk. That's it." Kurogiri adjusted the collar of his vest and while she couldn't discern a mouth, she knew he was smiling. "I heard about your friend. How he...lost his powers."

Thanks to you, she almost growled, but for once it had nothing to do with him and his association. Too bad. She had wanted to punch something for days now and he was an easy target. "You care why?"

"You know our boss. You know the abilities he has," Kurogiri stated softly. Each word was slow, deliberate. "He could change that."

Speechless, Nejire stared at him. This was not the offer she had been expecting, the threat she had braced herself for. Her shoulders shook as she hunched over and laughed. "Really? This is what you wanted?"

Waiting for her to calm down, Kurogiri said nothing, merely crossing his arms patiently. When she wiped the tears from her eyes, standing straight once more, he added, "We can fix him."

"Hey, hey, you think Mirio would accept that?" Nejire snorted at the preposterous idea. He would never go for it. Even if meant he could become a hero again, if the villains were offering, there had to be a terrible catch. "We're not that stupid."

"No, I don't think you are," Kurogiri agreed. His black mist hands tucked into his pockets and he cocked his head. "But...you know how they are handling it. You know how your friend is. How even your other friend is."

Nejire took a step back, surprised. Mirio was one thing; Tamaki shouldn't even be on their radar. Her voice cracked. "How-How do you know that?"

"We have more followers than you know." A black warp opened up behind Kurogiri, the mist from his body flowing around him as he stepped back into it. "We could change all that. Consider it."

And then he was gone and Nejire wished she had yelled at him. Something, anything, just to let him know that he hadn't gotten to her.

To let herself know that he hadn't gotten to her.

-x-

165.

Nejire stared at the gold numbers, at the white door with its tiny window. Her hand rested on the doorknob, her other poised to knock. Yet, that wasn't right. Simply knocking wasn't her usual style. Taking a deep breath, she hurled the door open, bouncing in with a sunny smile. "Mirio?"

Her friend snapped his head toward her, body tense and ready for a fight. Recognizing her, he blinked owlishly before turning to the clock on the other side of the room. "Nejire? Were classes cancelled?"

"Not anymore," she chirped, flouncing into the chair next to his bed. There was an empty one on the other side of the room. The one Tamaki normally took. At one point, he had practically lived in the room, watching Mirio as he drifted in and out of consciousness.

Now Nejire slid her eyes past the vacant spot, past the ghost of him that watched them with a quiet smile. It had been weeks since he'd set foot in the room and she had never known that absence could hurt like a punch in the gut.

"Not anymore?" Mirio repeated slowly, processing her sentence before sighing. "Nejire, you can't cut class."

"Hey, you're more important than class," Nejire retorted, reaching out to grab his hand. She batted her eyes innocently. "It's not cutting class. It's caring for a friend."

Mirio squeezed her hand gently, his eyes softening. "Thank you." Then he let go and frowned. "And you've used this excuse before—you can't skip tests."

"Yessir," Nejire rolled her eyes, unable to wipe the smile from her face. The colour was back on Mirio's face, after weeks of him looking like a zombie. Only the slightly-worn crinkle of his eyes, the red puffiness of his cheeks, let out that he hadn't recovered. It was a start.

"You're lucky none of the teachers are here." Mirio struggled to sit up, the wires on his arm a restraint. Each movement jostled him, and she reached out to steady him as he eased into an upright position. "Thanks."

"I looked like a mummy," Mirio corrected, his brow knitting. He gestured at his body, miraculously clear of bandages. "It's been weeks since I healed."

"Then you can leave soon?" she asked, hope rising.

"No," he answered flatly, staring down at his bedsheets. "The doctors want to run a few more tests. Since I'm..." His voice cracked, unable to say the last word, unable to admit the reality of his life now.

Quirkless. Her mind supplied the last word, the thought running through her head constantly. Crumpling her skirt under her hands, she opened her mouth, searching for the right thing to say. To do. Anything to ease his pain. Nejire had always been good at lifting the mood, but the answer thwarted her this time.

Noticing her concern, Mirio flashed a bright smile. "Don't worry, it'll all work out. The doctors' will figure out something."

"They will." Nejire clenched her skirt tighter until her nails dug into her thighs. Her lips were raw from how many times she'd bitten them, worrying them as she tried to find the silver lining to all of this.

"And if they don't...Sir..." To his credit, his voice didn't break. Not like the glasses that had broken when he'd first found about his mentor's death, not like the way his face had when he had realized it was all for vain, that he had lost his powers and his teacher and none of his sacrifices had saved the child trapped in the darkness. His expression slipped slightly. After a deep breath, he forced his smile back up. "Sir wouldn't want me to mope like this. There's something else I can do."

It was meant to be reassuring. It was meant to be normal. Despite his best efforts, Mirio's expression was none of those things. Nejire had never hated anything as much as she hated that smile. There was nothing real about it, nothing Mirio-like at all.

It was a façade and she hated how she couldn't make it go away.

-x-

Ignoring the whispers and stares, Nejire walked through the boy's side of the dorms, coming to a stop only once she was in front of Tamaki's room. A white door. A nameplate. It reminded her of Mirio's hospital door and was just as intimidating to stand in front of. This time, she did knock. After a hard rap, she heard a muffled, "Yes?"

Without answering, she entered the room. Cardboard boxes covered the floor haphazardly, and she stared. The room looked like it had been hit by a burglar, the way clothes and personal items were strewn around. Closing the door behind her with a soft click, she swallowed. "Tamaki?"

"Nejire?" Surprised, Tamaki's head poked out of the closet. His eyes widened at the sight of her before he ducked back in. "You're here."

She wasn't sure what to make of that response. Happy? Annoyed? His inflection was flat and there was still time for her to leave, to run away from it all. Instead, Nejire took a step forward, carefully weaving her way through the mess. Keeping her voice cheerful, she asked, "Hey, hey, what's going on?"

"I'm going home." Tamaki's voice was muffled, the closet door blocking sound as well as sight.

So the rumor was true. "For a break?" she asked anyway, hoping against hope he'd say yes.

"No." Tamaki paused and she moved behind him, able to see his hands gripping the shirt he was supposed to be folding. How he hunched as he spoke. "I'm quitting."

"Why?" Her voice broke despite herself and, grabbing his shoulder, she turned him around. His eyes met her for a second before immediately turning to the ground and she gritted her teeth. Directness was never the best way to approach Tamaki, but Nejire didn't know any other way to ask.

"I...I'm not a good hero." Tamaki kept his gaze glued to the ground, as though the secret to life was found in the swirls of the wooden floor. He pulled back, stepping out of her grasp. "I'm not meant for this."

"None of us were." Everyone thought they'd fail, that first year. Thought that it was a miracle they'd made it, thought it was pity that helped them get so far. And now they were respected, admired, leading the pack. "Don't sell yourself short."

"I'm not." Tamaki looked at her now and she could make out the redness of his eyes, the dried tears on his face. "If someone else was there...if anyone else was there..."

Maybe Sir would have lived. Maybe the girl would have survived. Maybe Mirio would be whole.

Nejire tried not to recoil from the brunt of his grief, from the raw emotion in his voice. She should never have left him alone for so long. When he had stopped visiting Mirio, she thought he needed the space. They all had. She had been wrong. "You saved Kirishima. You helped."

"A better hero would have done more." He looked at her desperately, lost and unsure. "I...I'm taking up space where someone else would do better. I'm not a hero. I never was."

"That's not true." Nejire reached out, pulling him close and hugging him tightly. He didn't fight it like he usually did, too shy and awkward to hug back. No, instead he felt like a limp doll and it was only her strength that supported the two of them now. "You are a hero, you've always been one."

"I'm not," he refuted, but he didn't pull away.

Nejire thought of all the words she wanted to hear, all the things she wanted someone to say to her. Things she had needed to hear when she had dug through the rubble, her voice hoarse as she had screamed Tamaki's and Mirio's names. "It's not true. You're needed. Here. Things might have been worse if you weren't there."

If only she had gone with them. If only she had been stronger. If only. If only.

-x-

Crickets chirped, their noisy cacophony the only sound in the graveyard. Nejire walked along the rows between family plots, her footsteps muted. On this overcast day, a few people stood scattered here and there. A man's hands in prayer as he closed his eyes and his lips mumbled his thanks. On her right, a woman cleaned an altar, her child carrying incense sticks.

Sir Nighteye's grave was nowhere like this—a hero till the end, he had been buried in the Cemetery of Heroes, a statue of his likeness placed directly above his grave. Hard to miss, there was no mistaking his final resting spot from any other.

Unlike the nondescript marker Nejire stopped in front of now. It looked identical to the graves around it, as unnoticeable as a tree in a forest. Eri's grave didn't match the fighting, the chaos that lead to its creation. Nejire's fingers brushed Eri's name, the only sign indicating who was buried here.

"Eri." No family name, no ties, no friends. The police weren't able to confirm just where she came from, if she had been kidnapped or if her parents were one of the yakuza. Nejire knelt, lighting an incense stick. The smoke drifted lazily upwards.

She hadn't met the girl, only her dirty, bruised body as Izuku had carried her out. Mirio had saved her. Izuku had protected her. It was what a hero would do, what any hero would do.

"I wish he hadn't," she confessed, standing up. Nejire gritted her teeth angrily—a dead child, and all she could think was Mirio's fake smile, Tamaki's dark eyes. The splinters of her family, too jagged to put back together. A hero wouldn't wish this but it was all she could think about. "I wish he had never met you."

-x-

165.

Nejire stared at the gold numbers, at the white door with its tiny window. Her hand rested on the doorknob, her other poised to knock. Every single time she visited, she faced this dilemma, this fear in the pit of her stomach. Mirio was inside. At the same time, Mirio wasn't.

She peeked through the tiny door. Her eyes widened as she spotted Tamaki on the other side, his hands folded on his lap as he sat in his usual seat.

Tamaki had finally visited. Maybe that meant he wouldn't quit, that they'd be back to normal after this. Mirio would leave the hospital and they could figure out how to make it together and her hand grasped the doorknob, ready to toss it open. They were right, it only took time and things were—

Things were not normal. Despite the normalcy of the scene, something was off-kilter. Neither of them were speaking, Tamaki's gaze glued to his lap while Mirio was staring determinedly out a window. There had been a time Nejire had been jealous of their private conversations, their quiet banter that only ever happened when she was just out of sight, out of earshot. A sign that she wasn't as close to either of them as they were to each other.

Now, she would give anything for it to happen again. Her hand dropped to her side and she took a step back. There was no easy fix to this, to either of them. There might not be a fix at all.

-x-

"So?" Kurogiri stepped into the hospital parking lot and Nejire couldn't deny that she had been expecting, no, hoping he'd be there. "Have you given our proposition any thought?"

"I'll take it," she gritted out, her body not her own anymore. Every movement felt foreign, alien, her hand reaching across the void to shake Kurogiri's. She shouldn't do this. A small part of her knew that. A small part of her demanded that. This wasn't what a hero did. This would come back to bite them all, hurt them all.

But Mirio...Tamaki...she could just see their faces, as it was now. How broken her family had become. If she did nothing, they'd all just drift apart. Tamaki would live with a hunched back, burdened with the belief it was his fault. Mirio would try to be a different kind of hero, pretending it didn't kill him to think about Sir or Eri.

Nejire had never been as strong Mirio—he had always been the center of their group, the glue that kept them together. She couldn't do that, she couldn't even keep Tamaki's depression at bay. If Mirio got his powers back, if Mirio could just return...it would fix everything. They didn't need her for that, they never had. They could just go back to what they were in middle school, the big two.

It was a perfect plan, really. Mirio would be a hero again. Tamaki would remain a hero. And the two of them could team up and defeat her in whatever nefarious plan the league had planned. Maybe she'd be in jail, or maybe she'd be dead, but Mirio and Tamaki would have each other and that would be more than enough to fill in the void she'd leave behind.

"I thought you would." Kurogiri created a portal behind him and out came a nondescript man with a briefcase. "Give the serum to the doctor."

The other man nodded and headed toward the hospital. As she watched him leave, Kurogiri explained. "Your friend will be cured by evening."

"And no side effects?" she asked, remembering the tale of the monkey's paw. Wishes never came true, not in the way anyone wanted.

"None whatsoever." Kurogiri shook his hand. The portal remained open behind him. "It'll be like it never happened."

"...why?" she finally asked, turning back to him. Nejire narrowed her eyes, trying to discern his attentions. "He'll be a thorn in your side."

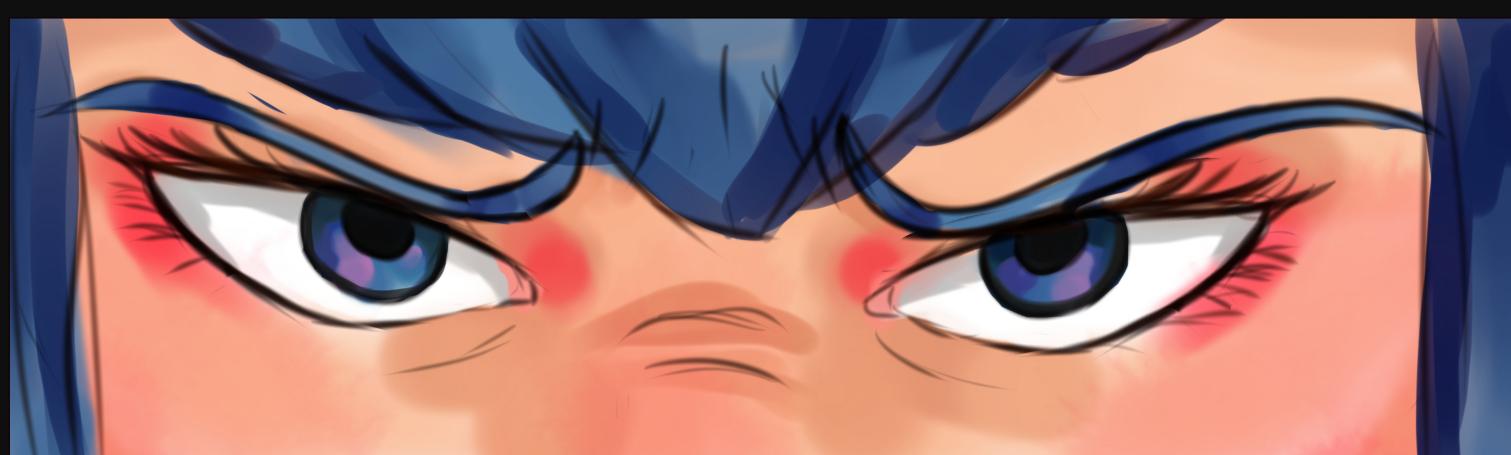
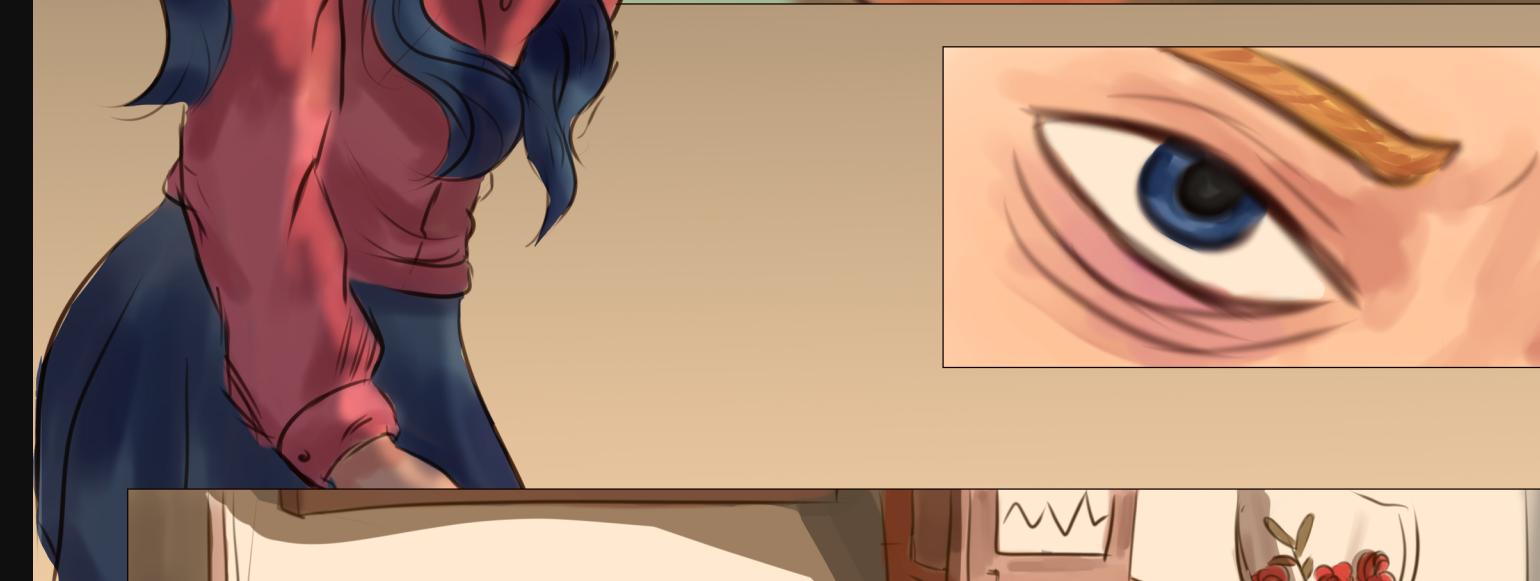
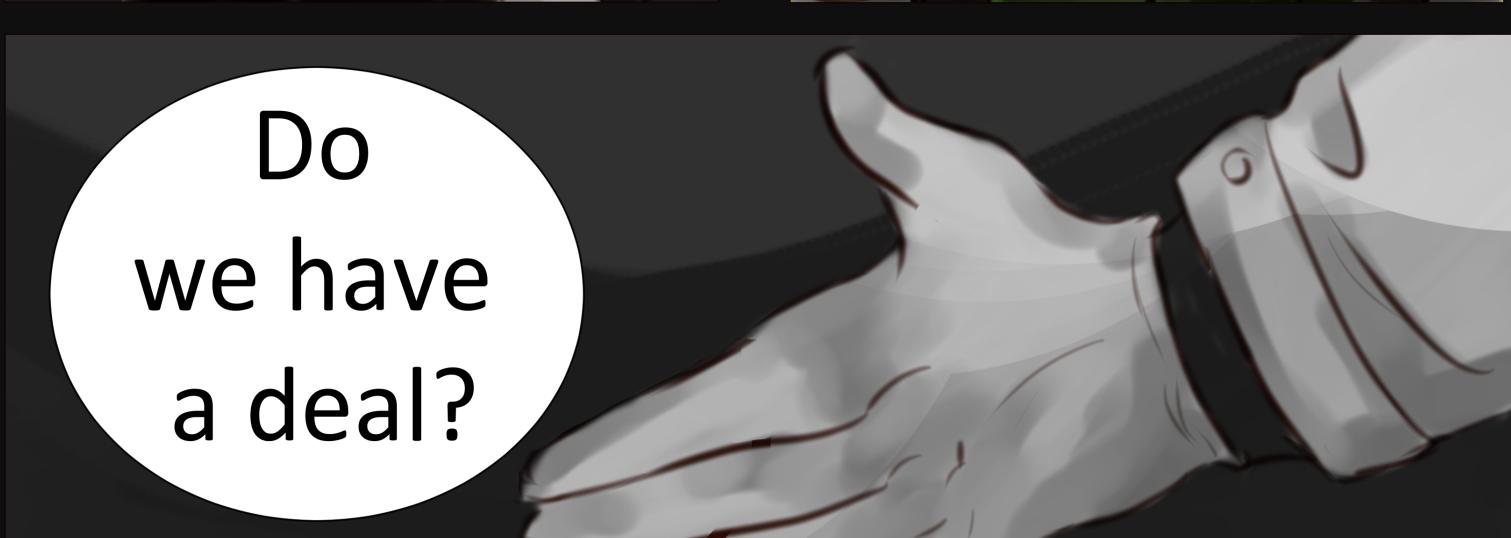
"We don't want you to renege on your part. And we have other ways of dealing with him." Kurogiri took a step to the side, gesturing to the shadowy portal. "After you."

A lie. That was what she wanted to believe, but the certainty in his voice told her otherwise. They had other ways of dealing with Mirio. After defeating All Might, it would be child's play. Looking back at the hospital one last time, she took a deep breath. "Fine."

This wasn't what a hero did, but the big three were more than just partners. They were friends, they were family, and family did anything to help one another.

Nejire stepped through the warp gate and didn't look back.



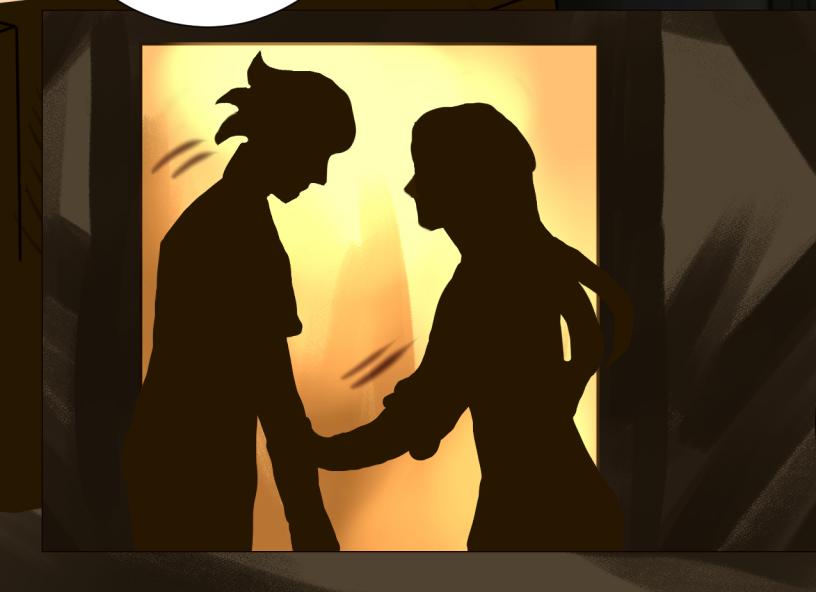




I'm quitting.  
I'm  
not meant  
for this



I'm taking up  
space where  
someone  
else would  
do better.



I'm not  
a hero.  
I never was.



I'LL TAKE IT



# VIRAL VALENTINE

by SibilantWhisper

The alleyways were a labyrinth of grimy passages and sharp turns. Routes roughly the width of a body, bordered by high walled buildings on every side, surpassed cramped and careened headlong into claustrophobic.

Only the echoing, clacking of heels in the distance kept him grounded and focused on his task of tracking the fleeing criminal. Dressed from head to toe in brightly colored spandex, a young hero stumbled forward as he halted mid-run in the alleyway, the water from a standing puddle disturbed as his boot splashed through it. He turned in hesitant circles, expression vigilant as he glanced around.

It was difficult to make out anything past his own heaving breaths, and he was straining to hear with his pulse pounding in his head... The clang of metal hitting the ground sounded closer than he expected, back the way he'd come.  
The factory district--!

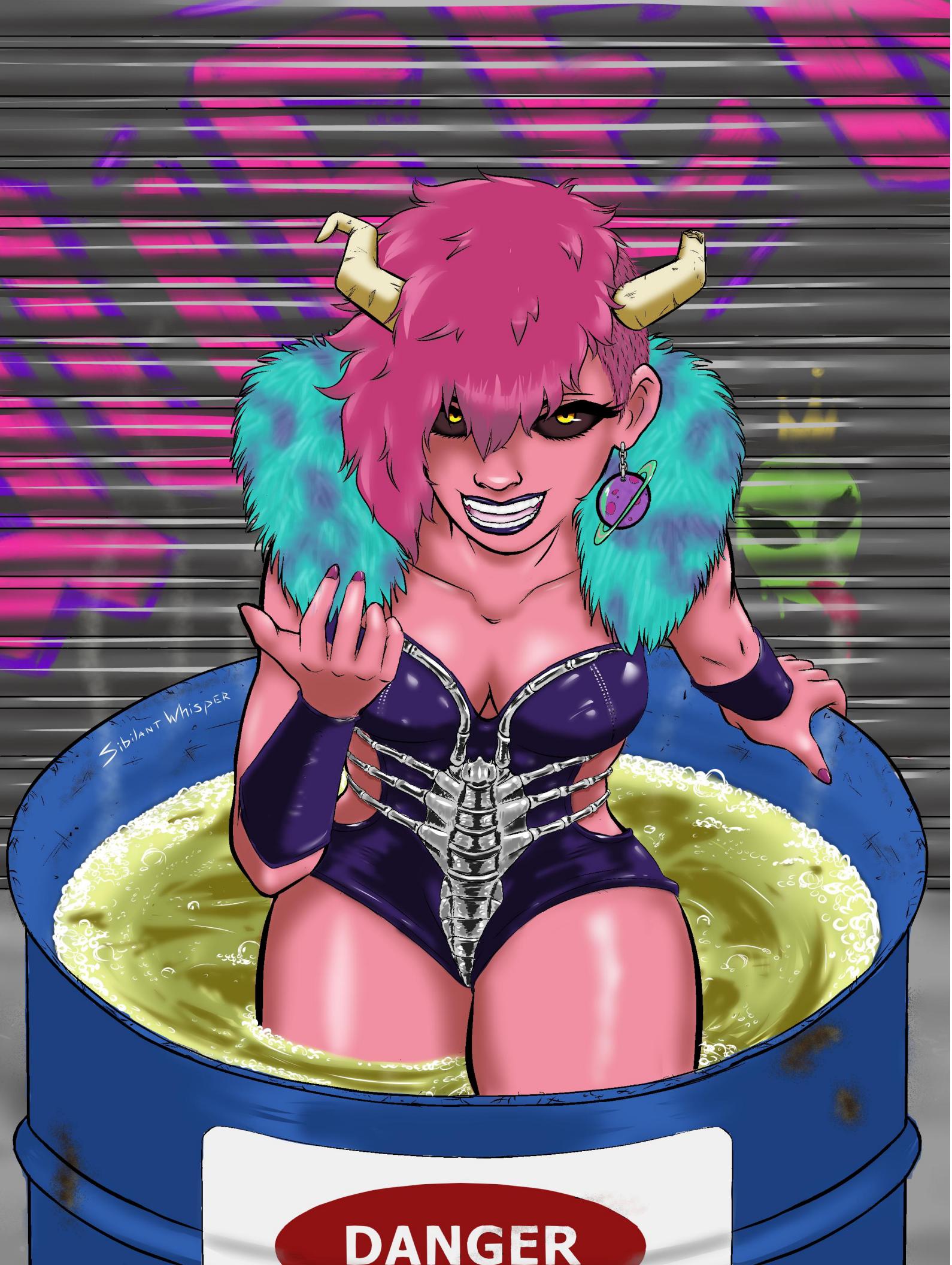
Doubling back, the hero took off and turned down an alcove he'd passed earlier, catching the unmistakable whiff of burned metal. A burst of speed brought him around a corner that graciously opened up to a wider alley, closed off by a brick walled fence and a wrought iron gate. Or at least... it had been. Now it was reduced to a gaping, melted hole. The bars were still dripping with a viscous clear fluid, melted right at the hinges and steaming. It was reckless, but he charged through the opening, grateful for the durable make of his suit as he skidded to a stop in an abandoned street, unmarred. 'Finally, a bit of space' he thought, eyeing the remains of the gate on the ground.

Taking a moment, Protoman leaned forward, hands resting on his knees as he tried to gather his thoughts. 'Don't be hasty, be smart--analyze the situation.' He was without backup; what he'd started as a routine patrol had turned into a frantic chase downtown. The first shift he'd taken without his mentor, and he'd stumbled across the aftermath of a battle, with two pro heroes lying prone at the feet of the Alien Queen herself.

He'd wasted little time engaging her--how could he not after that? She'd made a run for it and this was not a chance he was willing to let slip past.

Alien Queen wasn't a B-list villain... not anymore. She was a common criminal name in a growing list of lower-tiered criminals who'd suddenly become more prolific in the past six months. Villains who had once committed small crimes like petty theft and public disturbance were suddenly stepping up their game. Growing bolder and wiser, taking precautions, and covering their tracks. The obvious assumption had been that they were working in groups now, but none of the crimes seemed to be connected. Nor had they truly changed in motivation for their crimes. The pink villainess was still known for flamboyant displays like livestreaming her jewelry heists and public vandalism at the local malls. Nothing that would lead them to think she was a part of anything heinous... not until now.

Looking around the street he was in, the rookie took note of the wide brick buildings, close knit in clusters and fenced off by patches of fields. The industrial district of Takodana



DANGER

was nothing but factories and business warehouses. Usually a bustling area thanks to the slew of jobs here, it was currently dead quiet; the blame lay within the blackened, charred remains of one building nearby. A monumental chain of explosions that had later been called a terrorist attack had claimed the lives of innocent civilians and even a few heroes. While the culprit hadn't been found, it had left the area an abandoned mess for months as the community recovered.

Had she come here on purpose, hoping to shake him? She would've been successful but... he looked towards the ground, spotting a trail of red on the steps leading to the door of a warehouse. A hand print was just visible on the handle. She was hurt. That much he knew already; her unsteady gait had been one of the main incentives to pursue her. He knew he'd been gaining on her the longer the chase went on, but it must've been pretty bad if she was foolish enough to leave a trail.

Cautiously, he approached the door, running through the basic protocols of clearing a room in his mind. 'Check your points.' He grasped the handle and nudged it open with a shoulder, tensed for an ambush or trap. A quick step in with his finger aimed forward like an imaginary gun, his free hand steadied his wrist as he swiftly faced the left and the right--nothing.

The door creaked slightly behind him as he made to close it back and he winced, crouching low to look around. Well, nothing to be done about that. Alerting her might give away that he was there, but perhaps she'd make a mistake of her own in this silent hideout. It seemed to be an old storage space, perhaps for a furniture store. Shelves, stools, dining tables and covered couches sat dusty and unused, lining the walls and floor in marked aisles. There was a fine layer of grime over everything and it never failed how much villains seemed to find the worst places--wait.

Hiding, in this dust? He looked down, and sure enough there were dark splotches to go with the new footprints she was helpfully leaving. They disappeared around the corner so he followed, careful not to make any sounds. The trail led towards the back rather directly so he aimed for the wall aisle instead, hoping to get a better view of the room and any crouching figures. A rustle of cloth made him pause, but then it was gone. The hair-raising feeling of being watched wasn't present. Every single thing left him on edge.

'Acid.' He reminded himself of what he could recall from the reports, trying to keep himself focused. Alien Queen was reckless and destructive, a good close-range fighter. His eyes swept up towards the rafters...and agile, he amended. The shift of something against wood brought his attention towards a yellow tarp near a ceiling light up ahead. It was tattered and plain, but his eyes were drawn to the bottom, where a smear of blood trailed down and--

He stopped, staring at the fallen form just on the other side of the tarp.

A pair of booted legs were visible on the floor, just out of sight. He couldn't be that lucky. Even if she'd collapsed, she was probably baiting him closer to attack him with acid. Or...maybe she'd been more injured than he thought--it made sense. While she was a decent villain who didn't waste time on useless fights, he'd wondered why she ran from him.

Her opponents had been Gorgonite and Vertegra. A poison quirk hero and another who could induce vertigo. It was possible she'd suffered one or both effects after that fight.... It felt too easy, but he couldn't waste time if she really was out cold. Time was of the essence. Leaning forward, he lined himself up with the wall and crept towards the area where the tarp hung, resting his weight on the balls of his feet in preparation. Aiming his finger at the silhouette of the rest of the body, he took a quick step around.

"Don't mov--" The cloth was drawn back with a quick yank, revealing the booted feet he'd seen, attached to the lower half of a broken mannequin. He tensed, eyes wide and searching until he spotted the faint imprints of bare feet leading away from him in the dust; an emergency exit up ahead was wide open. His mind jolted back into action--Shit, she'd fooled him! Made him overly cautious to buy time for herself to get away.

The sound nearly escaped his notice: a sizzling creak of weakening wood as weight bore down on it, coming up right behind him in an odd sweeping rhythm. The proximity had him whirling around, on guard. Dark eyes and a bright smile, the pink figure rushed towards his vulnerable back in a charge, bare feet sliding on the acid drenched floor at a wicked speed.

She was too close--!

He just managed to get his guard up but she acted sooner, a sharp jab flashing out between his raised arms to crack against his nose before he had a chance to think. Protoman's head snapped back, pain blossoming across his face in a distracting burn that threatened to bring tears from the force. He pushed past it, raising his finger as he stumbled backwards and firing off a narrow white beam in her direction. Her timing made the dodge look effortless, one foot sliding out and dropping her form low as she swiftly ducked and lunged. He tried to retreat, anything to create distance but she closed it in seconds, swooping in low right under him, quicker than his eyes could follow. He glanced down just as she came rising up as a vicious blur, and right before her fist crashed into his chin, he swore she winked at him.

It was the smell of paint that stirred him first, a pungent layer that failed to mask the staleness of the air... after that came the sounds. The steady, misting spray of an aerosol can, a ball of silver rattling around inside as it was shaken roughly. The clack of heeled boots across the floor as someone moved around chatting.

"Nah, you know me--I can improvise. Thanks for hooking me up, babe."

He gave an involuntary groan as discomforts made themselves known. His face throbbed, his jaw worsened by the restricting tug of scratchy cloth running through his mouth and behind his neck. The knot of cloth on his tongue made it unbearably dry and brought a horrid aftertaste along with it that he couldn't even swallow away. The background noise moved behind him, closer to his right, and he naturally leaned towards it.

It wasn't until he shifted his arms and felt that his hands were bound into fists, fixed so that every fingertip was curled tightly towards his palms that he realized he was in real trouble. Brown, bleary eyes opened at last, and he lifted his head to let out a questioning mumble as his vision swam. Alien Queen stepped around into his line of sight, her phone

screen going dark with firm tap of her finger as she rested a hand on her hip and looked him over. A paint respirator rested over the lower half of her face and she reached up to tug it down with a slim finger.

"Hey sunshine," she greeted softly, in a tone like an old friend. For a moment he was too thrown to react. She even smiled with disarming fondness to match. "Finally awake I see--was getting kinda worried you'd miss out on the whole show. No hard feelings about that, right?" She mimed a punch towards her own jaw and he glared, dark eyes darting left and right as he tried to take stock of what was going on. His surroundings weren't the same, but they looked similar, a bricked-in warehouse with covered chairs and crates caked in dust. There was a window to the far left, too murky to be sure of, but he thought maybe, maybe he could see the crumbled ruins of that exploded building nearby. That meant he was in the same area, building even. Were they upstairs?

His thoughts swam as pain throbbed across his face again. 'C'mon, focus. Details.' Her. Alien Queen's movements--she looked infuriatingly untouched by everything that had occurred. A battle with two pro heroes, a subsequent chase through the city with a limp... Whatever 'wound' she'd been milking before, he couldn't see any trace of it. If she really had been bleeding she'd had ample time to take care of it. Her stride was smooth without a hint of pain and no matter where he looked on her... costume, from the furred collar to the boots, they were clean of any blemishes or blood.

He'd been a fool. Played, right from the beginning.

His eyes shot up suddenly, realizing he might be giving off the wrong impression with his observations. Sure enough, the pink villainess bore a knowing smirk as she stepped forward to lean in closer. It was the look in her eyes, not her looks, that suddenly made him swallow.

"Damn, I really rang your bell huh? There goes half your fan base..." she muttered to herself. His brow furrowed in question but she didn't seem to notice, rambling from one thought to another casually like they were talking over lunch. "Hey, does it suck when your hero rating mainly appeals to kids eight to twelve? Like not even thirteen, dude--twelve. That's the age range for Legos."

She tilted her head at him like she expected him to answer, only then taking note of his confusion. Waving her phone about and tugging a familiar hero ID from her bodice, she flashed a grin. "Oh, yeah we're good and acquainted now. I know all about you...Kousen." The way she said his name was too familiar, but he didn't let on that it bothered him. "Like second date stuff--you gotta tell your fans to lay off the Hero Wiki. It has everything in there..."

He gave up on discretion, openly tugging at his binds as she strolled a slow circle around him, referencing her phone as she read aloud. Fuck, he could barely feel anything in his fingers, the ropes were tight across his arms, binding his hands into balled fists to keep him from using his quirk and securing him to the chair he sat on. The Alien Queen raised her voice to be heard over his noise.

"Katou Kousen. Alias, 'The Finger Guns Hero,' Protoman -- they let you get away with that?" His response was too muffled to make out but she nodded like understood. "Unfair. Mentor, 'Can not stop twinkling' --twinkle toes, really?" She gave him a side eye as she passed. "That explains the glass jaw... Quirk, Laser fingers--" She did jazz hands as she said it, and strangely enough he was more offended by the implication that his ability could be dumbed down to something showtune related than the slight to his boss. He muttered something smart beneath the gag, just for his own benefit, but the way his jaw clicked only seemed to make her point.

"I can read your daily horoscope if you want--" He didn't have time for this. Jerking violently at the restraints, he let out a muffled scream as a heat built in his heat resistant hands underneath the ropes. They wouldn't hold out against a full powered laser, but he could risk a hole in the palm if it meant--

"Whoa hey no," she pushed him back against the seat with the toe of her boot and just stared at him, shaking her head after a while before continuing. "You guys are so dramatic... look, all that means is I know you're the exact type to cooperate with me. You do it for your little fans, I'll even make it fun and we'll both be on our way. It's just a little popularity contest."

...What?

His expression must not have improved, because she dropped her shoulders and sighed loudly like he was the difficult one. Stepping into his space, she dropped herself onto his lap and threw an arm around his shoulder. "Don't act brand new. You know how big of a deal it is to have a social media presence! I've got a rep, y'know? I don't do boring, I like to make it fun for my fans so I need to keep it interesting." She ran her hands through his hair idly like it was her own and mused; he couldn't help but feel like a pet. "It's kind of like performance art, this time I just wanna answer a simple question: Do heroes have a more loyal following... or do villains? Say cheese." She snapped a picture and hopped up, tapping away on her phone.

"C'mon what's your handle, I'll tag you!" She was nuts. Had to be. She was just too chaotic for him to get a read on. There wasn't anything he felt he could reference on how to handle this. Was she serious? Was it foolish to even consider it might be the truth? Was it dangerous to assume that couldn't be exactly what she was after? Alien Queen's file had called her 'frivolous'...had.

His eyes followed her as she marched to different spots in the room, posing. He couldn't see what she was doing clearly until she held up her phone at an angle, looking to capture both herself and the captive hero behind her. There was a flurry of color over the phone screen, text, emojis and gifs flooding the chat as people were notified about her going live, pinging other friends, news sites and fans worldwide who were equally obsessed with her.

Of course.

Alien Queen liked to stream.

It was true, he did understand that whole deal about social media. He didn't have a huge name for himself, there were so many heroes and his follower account couldn't make a dent in the fans of the top ten pros. But this was Alien Queen, someone with the numbers and a decent fanbase. Whether they could track her or not, it wouldn't be impossible to narrow down the location. She hadn't gone far from the initial crime scene, and now she was hanging around in the same warehouse she'd tracked blood to. Playing around and taking too many risks-- it had always been her Achilles' heel. She spent more time fleeing the scene than she did actually making off with successful heists, like an adrenaline junkie with no parachute.

Frivolous still, then. At least this way, he had some sort of game plan. Hope for the best that the right people saw the livestream in time and would send help. He just had to keep her online and entertained...

"Shout out to my boy Lightningod69 for keeping me online. It was pretty rude for the site to ban my account like that, but now I'm back. Anyway--news! I have a guest today, some of you out there might recognize him. Now don't worry your pretty heads, he's in good hands...sorry about the face. I've got a fun idea but i'm only gonna tell you guys when we get more viewers! For now ask me stuff, it's been a while."

It felt unreal, like he was the extra of some sordid skit. For the first few minutes it was slow, the Alien Queen didn't even acknowledge him, so lost in the mindless online chatter with giddiness he'd expect from a teenager. Questions about any and everything, clothes, her hair, crime. Eventually, they moved onto him "What's with the bronze age shoulder pads? Was that twinkle toes' idea? Are you dating anyone?" If he didn't respond or took too long to answer, she'd press a palm to his chest or leg and let her hand get just saturated enough to eat through his suit and start to adhere to his skin. Each time his panicked, muffled yells grew loud enough to make her laugh she'd finally back off with a quick flood of harmless gel like substance to douse the spot. His brow was dotted with sweat by the time she grew tired, but the risk was worth it. Dragging out the questions was more time for the police and heroes to get a clue about his situation.

"So food for thought, if I had a booze line and I named it Crown 51 would you guys buy-- oh hey we're past 10k already! Plan reveal time~" Standing upright, she waved her hands excitedly. "We'll keep this simple ok? It's really cool how much fans wanna be involved, whether you like heroes or whatever, but you guys never get a chance to help us. Today, you guys are calling all the shots." Dread began to pool in Kousen's gut. His eyes followed the pink figure as she paced, attention on her phone as she tapped away.

"It's liiike this, we'll make a poll right? You guys get to decide what happens! Whatever you choose in the next five - no, ten minutes? I promise I'll do it, scout's honor." She pressed two fingers to her head in a mock salute. "First you gotta help me with poll suggestions. 'What should I do to Protoman?'... Hmm, melt... his toes? Kiss him? Make him submit--oh you guys are dirty." She laughed and grew quiet, happily adding in options in a way he found nauseating. He swallowed, looking around the room for anything that could help him delay this game. A familiar weight dropped itself back into his lap rudely, an arm around his shoulder and a phone in his face. It was only when he looked at his own wide eyed, bruised face up close in the recording that another idea occurred to him.

"Lemme ask you something while we wait." He tried to speak, spittle forming around the sides of the soaked gag. It was obvious she wanted a response that didn't require words. She wasn't going to be stupid enough to let him speak, it seemed. Instead, he tried to slow his blinking, too stunned and stupidly alarmed for anyone to think strange. They didn't have to catch the almost pointed pauses between his blinks.

T...A...K...O..

"God--" The villainess hopped up, exasperated. Turning with the screen of her phone face down against her chest, she hissed a whisper. "You're fun to torture but you're boring like this. The bossman gets all the fun hostages and I get you--you're like a deer in headlights. You've gotta sell the drama, your follower count will blow up after this, trust me. I mean...depending." She gave a sheepish shrug before engaging the viewers again. "Rookies."

The comment had left him blinking, this time genuinely.

A boss. A leader. Someone behind the scenes like the pros suspected but hadn't had confirmed before-- finally, something useful from all this. It had been an embarrassing predicament but the Queen's flaws were lining up in his favor. If he could just finish his message...

The fanfare of an alarm signified just how little time he had left as his captor bounced in place and read the results. Her body stilled all of a sudden and he held his breath, only for an explosion of guttural laughter to shake him more than any attack would've. He was ramrod straight in his chair, chest heaving with anxiety. That couldn't be good. He was going to have to act, make a stand, not let her have her way, maybe if he just knocked the hand with the phone she would--conveniently, the very thing he needed was shoved into his face, albeit unsteadily as the owner stumbled, one arm wrapped around her middle as she had a giggle fit. It took a few seconds before she straightened up enough to properly show him the screen, and his eyes zeroed in on the results.

His stomach dropped.

Free him had lost, and by a small, small margin. It wasn't exactly helpful to see Wet Willy crowned at the top, but it was preferred over the juvenile and violent options scattered in the lower numbers. Kill, Kiss, Scar, Fuck, Lick, ...some noble souls had dared to vote for Turn yourself in.

None of it mattered when it meant he could live. His heart rate had climbed higher than he thought, and he slumped in his seat as best he could to let the relief course through him. All the while his captor wiped amused tears from her eyes. "I can't believe it. Your followers are sweet, they really tried too, but I guess there's more trolls than hardcore fans on either side. At least they've got a sense of humor, right?" He inhaled, mouth shifting against the uncomfortable gag as he stared at her with desperation. Would she hold up her end of the bargain? He'd played along and bided his time, pretending to help her. She didn't have to know it was because he was aiming to be the rookie who'd aided in the capture of a well known criminal and subsequently dismantled a gang--that would be *front page news*.

He tried to steel himself with the reminder as he looked her head on, refusing to bristle.

Wearing an approving smirk, Alien Queen sauntered a little closer, holding up the phone to record the viewers' chosen punishment. "C'mon be a good sport and look on the bright side- What's so bad about a wet willy from me?" As if to demonstrate, she dragged her tongue obscenely against her middle finger, slathering the digit generously in a way that shouldn't have been attractive, not with where it was going and the current situation. He maintained his composure as she walked over, looking at the livestream as she sidled along behind him in out of frame, and jammed a wet finger into his ear.

Even with full warning that it was coming, the cool sensation caused a natural shudder of revulsion as he grimaced and pulled away from her persistent hand. Her laughter was close, hovering just over his shoulder as she held up the phone to capture both expressions. 'Distractions, focus.' He cracked an eye open to look at the camera, a pool of determination in his gut as he blinked in code. Anyone, just one observant person watching...

TA. KO. DA. NA--

He froze, eyes stuck wide as he stared at himself in the camera. His chest seized as if he were struggling suddenly to breathe around the gag, and with a watery choking sound, red soaked through around the cloth. His eyes sought out the bright smudge of pink he could still make out as the rest faded with his vision; darkness enveloped him a final time, sending him on his way with the same charismatic wink of black and gold.

There were no words as Mina ignored the telltale sizzle and bubbling of her acid melting its way through skin. Her eyes were fixed to the screen, hand unmoving even as the warm weight surrounding her finger sloughed off into a steaming sludge. A simple violent flick of her hands rid her of the remaining acid clinging to her skin. The mood of the stream seemed to shift, suddenly more grim and defining. There was uncharacteristic patience as the villainess turned the camera from the limp corpse in the chair to her own face, up close and a far more appealing sight. A few quick strides brought her away from her improvised stage and to the newly christened wall she'd been hiding on the far right. When she turned the camera followed, revealing the brick wall behind her. Still gleaming with the wet sheen of fresh paint, a makeshift mural greeted the viewers. A large broken jumble of green text spelled out GROUND SQUAD, the letters highlighted by the brilliant bold orange that detailed an explosion going off beneath it. Off to the side she'd even included her own adorable tag of a crowned alien head blowing a raspberry (she personally found it to be a nice touch).

"This," she spoke slowly, distracted by an errant curl that she paused to shift from her face, before refocusing. "...was just a taste. You never had a clue it was coming, but I bet you do now, Deku." The words were mocking, with a little too much bite from those pursed lips that spread into a foreboding grin. They didn't seem to fit; it was likely she was quoting someone verbatim. "Ground Zero's coming, chosen one. We'll be in touch."

And with all the ease that modern technology afforded to the elusive Alien Queen, she ended her ground shaking message with a simple tap of a finger, and the stream went dead.



Rowyn Golde



EXPLOSIONBOI

# LET'S KILL ALL MIGHT

by OhShitMyShip

Kurogiri was more than surprised to find a boy knocking at the door to their lair.

He looked about fifteen, with flyaway green hair, freckles, and green eyes filled with determination. He was also wearing the uniform of a local high school, with a mess of a tie.

"We don't serve minors," Kurogiri said firmly, beginning to shut the door. "This isn't just a bar," the boy stated, "and I don't want a drink. I want to join the League of Villains."

Five minutes later, the boy sat at the bar, a few seats away from Shigaraki, who was staring him down. Kurogiri cleaned an already spotless glass, uncomfortable with the tension in the room.

"How did you find us?" Shigaraki finally demanded. The boy shrugged and picked at his tie, "I did my research. Wasn't hard. The police just don't notice what I do."

"What do you want?" Shigaraki asked. "To join!" The boy cried earnestly, "I think I could help you out!" "And just what makes you think that we want your help?" Shigaraki hissed, turning away, "Get out before I turn you to dust."

"I found you, didn't I?" The boy said, "That's gotta be worth something! I tracked you guys down! Who else can say they did that?"

"He's got a point," Kurogiri admitted, "What do you think, Tomura?" "Ugh, fine," Shigaraki sighed, turning back to face him, "We'll hear you out." The boy grinned. That was a tad unsettling, considering what he was asking. "I heard that you guys attacked the USJ," he began, "That you were there to kill All Might. I couldn't help but be invested, y'know? So, um, I looked up your descriptions." The boy then reached into his backpack, pulling out a large file. He laid it on the bar and rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly, "After that, I figured out how to keep tabs on your locations. Then I did some real estate research, and I found this place. And I thought, hey, why not, right?"

"So you spend a lot of time on the internet," Shigaraki replied coldly, "Like every other kid your age. How does that help us?"

While they spoke, Kurogiri picked up the file and opened it up. He was amazed by how much information there was – addresses, quirks, similar attacks that could be drawn to them, who the other villains at USJ were, their testimonies, even suggestions for team-ups. Looking at the suggestions, Kurogiri couldn't help but feel a little stupid. Of course they should have put the electric types with the shipwreck, killing anything in the water.

"I don't know how you manage to get all your information," the boy said, "but it's not enough. UA is the best school in the nation, and its security is some of the best in the world."

"We got in before," Shigaraki snapped, "We can do it again." "I don't think so," the boy

said, his hands fidgety, "Not that you're not good enough! It's just that UA has you guys marked as enemies now, so they're going to be on their guard from now on." "Tomura..." Kurogiri said, his eyes widening at the file, "You're not going to believe this...." He flipped around the file, revealing a detailed photomap. Shigaraki took it and looked at it, surprised at the information.

"Explain this!" He hissed at the boy, shoving the file at him. "Oh, sorry," the boy apologized, "I didn't mean to get so personal, but this was interesting!" He grinned and leaned in, "Your name is actually Shimura Tenko, and you're the grandson of All Might's mentor! I did some digging, and it turns out that she and another pro hero did a lot of private training with him, and they were close. I don't exactly know what their relationship was, though.... But anyways, I figured out that it's all connected! You were taken in by a villain – now that took some digging, he wasn't easy to find. I still don't know everything about him, or his quirk, it looks like he has multiple, and I'm wondering how that works. Can he create new ones? Is that possible?"

"Hey!" Shigaraki snapped his fingers impatiently. "Oh, sorry," the boy said with an awkward laugh, "I can get kind of into it." Kurogiri pointed at the file, "You did all of this on your own?" The boy nodded, smiling proudly. "Is this, like, your quirk?" Shigaraki asked. The boy's demeanour immediately changed. He was no longer happy and cheerful, with his eyes dark and mouth turned down in a frown.

"I'm quirkless." The way he spoke made it clear that he did not wish to talk about it any further. "Fair enough," Kurogiri said, "You've proven to be quite observant. What do you think?" It was hard to tell through the hand on his face, but Kurogiri was pretty sure that Shigaraki was grinning when he said, "I think he'd make an excellent addition. What's your name, kid?"

The boy grinned, "You can call me Deku!"

"–and if you say something about his family, he'll be sure to answer!"

"You know how creepy this would look to an outsider, right?" Midoriya laughed awkwardly, scratching the back of his neck. He and Shinshou were sitting in Midoriya's room, going over notes and plans for the upcoming UA Sports Festival.

"I know," he admitted, "I'm just really observant." "Maybe that's your quirk," Shinshou suggested with a small smile, "Observation, or something."

He shrugged, "It would be cool, but no. I just took a lot of notes on heroes growing up. It's a hard habit to kick when you go to school with the next top heroes."

"I still think you could make it in the Support Course," Shinshou said, "I know you're not great with your hands, but you pay attention more than anyone. A real hero needs an informant."

"We're getting off track," Midoriya said, trying to play it off easy, "We still have Class B to go through. They don't have as much of the limelight, but they've got some pretty amazing quirks." "What about Bakugou?" Shinshou asked tentatively.

"Literally say anything," Midoriya replied, "He'll respond. He's not hard to piss off." "Sounds good. And you're really not going to try?"

"Everyone knows this is for the hero kids," Midoriya said, kind of bitterly, "The only reason the General courses are involved is so we don't feel left out. And quite frankly, I would rather be forgotten."

"But then how am I supposed to get into the hero course?" "Use your quirk on the principal, obviously." They both laughed, and Shinshou had the feeling it hadn't entirely been a joke.

The day of the Sports Festival came, and Shinshou found himself far more nervous than he'd anticipated.

He noticed his friend nervously eyeing the camera drones flying around, the crews circling through the crowd. They of course weren't being filmed, but the hero classes were in the spotlight, as usual.

Shinshou knew that Midoriya didn't like being the centre of attention, even in small groups. He put a hand on his friend's shoulder.

"Hey, you alright?" Midoriya seemed to be jarred from his thoughts. After a moment, he smiled, "Oh, y-yeah, I'm good! Just nervous, I guess."

"You're not the one competing," Shinshou pointed out, "It's not too late to, though. I'd be happy to work together and –"

"No," Midoriya said firmly, eyes glancing at a passing camera, "I'm not...being in the spotlight isn't a good idea for me. This is about you, we're all counting on you, Shinshou!" He smiled wryly, "No pressure though." Midoriya laughed, "No pressure. I'm sure you'll do great, Shinshou. I'll be cheering from the crowd."

"I'll keep an ear out," he assured, and then Bakugou was asked to speak, so they fell silent. Shinshou watched and listened, impressed by this kid's casual confidence, the way he declared he was going to win in the deadliest, factual of tones.

Shinshou turned to his friend to comment on this, but stopped when he saw the dark smirk on Midoriya's face. It was malevolent and frightening, as if he knew just how Bakugou would die. It scared Shinshou into silence.

"You've been doing great!" Midoriya congratulated as he entered Shinshou's waiting room.

"Yeah, well," Shinshou replied, "I couldn't've gotten this far without your help." "Just suggestions," Midoriya replied with a shrug, "By the way, what did you say to Iida?" "I told him he'd never make his brother proud," Shinshou said sheepishly. "Holy shit." "Yeah. After the next fight I'm going to apologize to him. It was pretty below the belt." "Fair enough," Midoriya conceded, "But we can worry about that after. You're going up against Kacchan. He's a bully, but he's a skilled bully. He knows what he's doing, and he probably suspects what your quirk is. You need to hit below the belt from the very beginning."

"Right," Shinshou said, "What should I say?"

"Ask about his mom," Midoriya suggested, "They don't get along well. That'll do it for sure."

"Got it." Shinshou nodded, then smiled, "Thanks for all the help, Midoriya." Midoriya smiled back, "That's what friends are for!"

Shinshou couldn't stay calm as the match commenced. Present Mic was hyping it up like nothing else, commenting on Bakugou's versatility, on his own mystery. He could comment all he wanted, but that wouldn't change the outcome.

The two stepped into the ring. The starting bell rang. Before Shinshou could even open his mouth, Bakugou blasted forward.

"How's your mother?" Shinshou yelled out, "I bet she's not even watching this, is she?" Bakugou scowled, but didn't answer. He just sent a blast at Shinshou. Thankfully, he was able to duck out of the way, but he was knocked back a few feet.

Shinshou swore silently and backed up – he couldn't take a direct hit. That would end the match.

"Does she even care if you win?" Shinshou tried again, feeling guilty at how hurtful his jabs were.

Bakugou didn't make a single sound, just lunged at him. Shinshou stumbled and fell. "I know how your quirk," he spat. Shit. Bakugou advanced menacingly on Shinshou, who scrambled back. He was at the edge of the ring when Bakugou raised his hand.

"Midoriya helped me. Didn't you used to be friends?" "I was never friends with that loser!" There it was. Bakugou froze, his eyes wide. "Exit the ring." Shinshou watched with relief as Bakugou slowly walked to the edge. It seemed as though he moved slower than the rest had, but it was most likely just Shinshou's nerves.

And then the impossible happened. Bakugou flexed his hand, and his palm exploded. Everyone froze. By that point, the audience had more or less figured out that Shinshou had a mind-control quirk. But every instance before then had been solid and perfect, impenetrable.

So why was Bakugou able to break through? There was no time to answer, though, as Bakugou used the moment to round on Shinshou, blasting him point blank. It was enough to knock him out, and as he fell, Shinshou smiled, watching the camera drones watching him.

It was enough to knock him out, and as he fell, Shinshou smiled, watching the camera drones watching him.

Stain knew from the moment he stepped through the door that he was in the wrong place.

The guy covered in ashen hands was creepy and slouched over, the bar was dingey but clean, and a man made of mist wearing a fancy suit cleaned a glass dutifully.

Pomp and circumstance. They were offering for him to join their little gang, and Stain was not about to accept it. But before Stain could respond, the door was flung open and a kid in a school uniform rushed through, panting.

"Sorry I'm late, the third years' section ran late but the Big Three were competing and I had to wa—"

The kid stopped short when he caught sight of Stain, eyes wide and mouth open. "I'm so sorry," he said quietly, "I didn't realize we had a meeting." "Quite alright, Deku," Kurogiri assured, "Stain, this is our youngest member, Deku. He's an inside informant. He orchestrated the silver medalist win at UA's Sports Festival."

Stain looked at the kid. Bright green hair and freckles, but otherwise forgettable, as far as appearances went. He seemed nervous and kept tugging at his poorly knotted tie.

"Anyways," Stain said, looking over to Hand Man, "I'm not interested. You go against what I'm trying to preach. Thanks for the offer, but I don't need it."

He turned away and opened the door, done with this interaction. He had barely made it up three steps when the door was slammed open again and the kid called out.

"Stain?!" He turned and frowned, "I'm not joining your stupid League, kid." "I'm sorry I wasn't here for the meeting," Deku said, shuffling his feet nervously, "So I don't know what was said – Kurogiri never takes notes."

Stain couldn't help but smile, "No shit, eh?" Deku smiled back, "But, I wanted to talk to you. I didn't realize who you were, sorry." "It's okay," Stain assured, kind of unsure what to do with the personal attention, "I don't really like my face being plastered everywhere." "Right," Deku said with a nervous laugh. There was a beat of silence. "Did...you want...something? Cuz a serial killer is a busy man and there are a ton of false heroes still out there."

"I know you're busy," Deku said, "but I..I wanted to ask... Why won't you join the League?" Stain wanted to laugh. The League was using this kid as a cuteness factor. A League of Villains trying to tug at a serial killer's heartstrings!

"Because you guys are working against my own ideals," Stain answered, "You want to destroy, I want to create. Most heroes don't actually care about the people. I'm playing Devil's Advocate to make the people see how corrupt their idols are."

The kid's eyes grew wide, his mouth open. Stain was unsure what to do, until he noticed the pink on Deku's cheeks.

"You get it," Deku whispered, "Heroes are corrupt. They do good for bad reasons. I wanna change that." Then his eyes narrowed, "You said most heroes. Who is the exception?"

"All Might, of course." Deku's face changed in a second. Before he was bright and open, now he was dark and closed off.

"Look, kid," Stain continued, "every single hero has done something shitty, used their money for their own profit. I did some research – did you know that 83% of All Might's annual income goes to charity? Not even just big names that get media attention; there are countless accounts of All Might leaving 200% tips, paying off medical bills, using his power to build houses. He does good for the sake of good, and that's what a hero does."

"Not all the time." Deku looked Stain right in the eye, "My friend was attacked by a villain. He was surrounded by heroes who were scared because of his quirk. They waited for better heroes. All Might was hiding in the crowd." Deku clenched his fist, "He watched my friend get kidnapped and did nothing."

"I believe you," Stain said, "but one mistake is not enough. He's a good man, and if he's the reason why you're a villain, you need to rethink your life."

The kid opened his mouth, then closed it, looking down in shame. Stain sighed and turned away.

"Wait!" He stopped and turned, seeing Deku holding a pen and notebook. "Can I please have your autograph?"

"No." Shigaraki scowled as he jabbed at the picture of the blond kid bound in chains, "He's perfect. Powerful, jaded, angry – he's exactly the player we need to add to our party."

"I'm telling you," Deku replied, "This is a bad idea. Kacchan is a bully, but he's a bully with morals. He says he's gonna be the top hero and there's not a doubt in my mind that says otherwise. Kidnapping him is gonna have all of the risks and none of the rewards."

"But he's powerful," Shigaraki insisted, becoming frustrated, "We need someone like him."

Deku sighed and leaned back in his chair, "What about the list I made up for you guys?" "All losers. We need this one." Shigaraki knew that he was being stubborn, but he knew what he was doing. Having the explosion kid would be their best bet.

"Whatever," Deku conceded, "But I can't be involved in this." "What?" Shigaraki snarled. "I'll help," Deku added quickly, "I can get you information and plan it out, but I can't be anywhere near this. I will be at home with my mom the entire time. If not, he'll know it's me and we'll all be screwed."

"But you'll get us information?" Deku nodded. "Fine. You're quirkless anyways – wouldn't be much help in the actual kidnapping." "I'll draw up a plan," Deku declared, "and get whatever information I can, but that's really it."

"That's all we need from you, Deku."

Bakugou was scared.

He didn't like admitting it, but he felt that the situation allowed for him to be scared.

Bakugou was tied up in the villains' den after just being kidnapped. Their camp had been raided and he'd been taken before anyone knew what was going on. He wanted to wonder whether his classmates were okay, but he didn't have time for that.

And then All Might arrived. He wanted to cry but no, he wouldn't. He would not admit that he was happy to see All Might, not out loud.

Not when shit hit the fan. He was suddenly yanked away by some invisible force, brought to a whole new location. He was suddenly faced with the villains, alone. He found himself hoping that he would see his friends, his classmates there to rescue him.

But he was alone. And no one could pull him out of the fight – he couldn't get away. Not by himself. He wasn't strong enough. Not strong enough.

So All Might was forced to protect him while also fighting the single most powerful villain Bakugou had ever witnessed.

Witnessed. He witnessed a lot; the villain claiming to be All Might's nemesis, the destruction, the pain, the terrifying fight.

And he was a first-hand witness to the fall of All Might.

Toshinori Yagi was dying.

He was no fool – he knew what the dangers of passing his quirk on would be, but he had hoped he wouldn't have to face One for All in this state. A selfish wish, he knew, but he was confident in young Mirio's abilities.

As he laid in the hospital bed, the life draining from him, he considered the fight. Worse than his last encounter with One for All, by a long shot.

He also hadn't had an audience at the time, and certainly not one of his own students that he had to protect. Toshinori didn't blame young Bakugou – it was not his fault that he was kidnapped. He thought back on the Sports Festival, when Bakugou resisted against his gold medal, chaining him up like a wild animal. That probably just made him look like the golden goose to the League of Villains.

The League. It took every bit of energy, but he managed to incapacitate One for All. Hell, it took away from his lifespan. It had only been two days, and he was closer to death than he'd like to admit. The doctors said they could help him, but his hopes were low.

He raised his head as he heard the door open, and saw a young man with green hair and freckles step through. He looked familiar, but Toshinori couldn't place him.

"Please," he croaked, "I appreciate your concern, but no fans." The boy scowled as he walked over. He was dressed plainly, and he was easily forgettable.

"I'm no fan," he grumbled, taking a seat next to the bed, "You don't remember me, huh?"

"I'm very tired," Toshinori sighed, "I'm sorry."

The boy shrugged, "It's okay. Most people don't remember me anyways. Maybe this will ring a bell."

The boy then tossed a notebook on the bedside table, open to a page of his own autograph. He noticed some stains on it, as well as a faint, but still rancid smell. His eyes widened. "The slime villain," he recalled, "You were the boy he attacked under the bridge. I remember you now."

The boy smiled, and Toshinori wished he knew his name. "Yeah!" He said cheerfully, "I'm glad you remember." The boy then reached into his pocket and produced a syringe filled with clear liquid.

"You probably remember the other boy who got captured as well," the boy continued, examining the syringe, "He was actually the one captured by the League of Villains, despite the advice I gave them." The boy sighed in exasperation.

"You...you work for the League?" The boy smiled and nodded, still staring at the syringe, "Yup! That day, when my friend was kidnapped...I saw you." His eyes finally met Toshinori's, "You were in the crowd. Hiding. I saw you watching. Like all the other heroes that were there, waiting for someone else with a better quirk. But who has a better quirk than All Might?"

"I was out of energy," Toshinori tried, doing his best not to look at the syringe in the boy's hands, "I couldn't have saved him even if I wanted to."

"But you didn't even try." Toshinori didn't know how to respond. The boy sighed again, "Well, it made me realize how useless heroes are. The League has got it right – we worship heroes, make them our idols, but they're glorified policemen with cool powers. We're going to tear it all down and make it new. And I have you to thank, for allowing me to open my eyes and see the world for how it really is."

"So you came here to kill me?" "Originally," the boy admitting, laughing a little nervously, "But on the way here, it got me thinking – it would look suspicious if you died now. Sure, you're in a sorry state, but you've got the best doctors in Japan looking after you, and some of the best security around."

"They let you in," he noticed. The boy rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly, "Nah, don't blame them. I'm just really observant. And I really needed to come here."

"You said 'originally,'" Toshinori noticed, "Did you change your mind on killing me?" "Yeah," the boy admitted, still playing with the syringe, "I was a big fan, you know. I still have you plastered up on my bedroom walls. I kept them up because I thought, hey, it reminds me of what I'm trying to do. I think I just didn't want to admit I still admired you."

He set the syringe down on the table, right beside the book with his signature open. "You're just going to leave evidence?" Toshinori asked, "You realize that I could call in the guards and have them arrest you for attempted murder, right?"

"I know. But you won't." The boy stood up, "You know that you made a villain out of me, a kid who so desperately wanted to be a hero. You're hoping that because I spared you, there's still good in me."

"You're young," Toshinori tried, "You can change." "I know. I don't want to." "But you let me live." The boy, now at the door, turned and smiled, "So now you'll live, knowing that a boy who so desperately wanted to be a hero turned to villainy, because you failed to save his friend."

Then he was gone, and Toshinori was alone.



# THE MASK

by Calucadu

Neito Monoma was an aspiring hero, well-known by his classmates and other students in the same year as him. With a bright future in front of him, he was ready to graduate high school and begin his career as a pro-hero.

Unfortunately, one day, on a school outing, a bunch of villains attacked the young students of UA. Their objective had seemed to be another, but brave Monoma stepped in front of his peers to protect them, which resulted in him losing his life at the hands of those horrible people. His classmates saw him die, watched as his body went limp and stared in horror as they took his corpse and disposed of it.

Except he didn't die.

I didn't die.

As a teenager, I'd been witness to the horrifying injustice in the hero world. Even at the beginning of our first year of high school we had been separated into different classes and treated differently depending on how "good" we were. It made my blood boil to think that there were power-hungry, money-making fools out there that didn't care about saving lives as long as they were getting rich off making a show out of us. Being a hero became meaningless to me. And it didn't help that the actual heroes doing their job probably did it just to get a higher ranking instead of aiming to actually save lives as they should be.

I started a one-man quest against heroes and their stupid hierarchy and named myself their number one enemy, and the villains offered me a position in their ranks when I presented my case to them. They agreed to help me fake my death and took me in. Years later, I'm still here, and while I don't agree with all of their ideals and I normally go solo, I'd say I do fit in rather well.

All my former schoolmates are now pro-heroes, battling each other for a better position on the horrible hero rankings. I don't pity or envy them. But I do want to help them if I can.

Inside the villain world, I'm The Mask, the self-proclaimed villain in charge of bringing justice to this rotten hero obsessed world.

I hang all the newspaper clippings I gather from the heroes I've framed. They're all over the walls of my crummy apartment, so I'm constantly reminded of my own personal victory. It feels great to see my sweet success pinned as decor.

Nothing fills me with more pride than drinking my early morning coffee as I reread over the headlines I have already memorised and reminisce about when I locked up a hero because they deserve to be in jail.

I've single handedly managed to be behind the incarceration of both old and new heroes. But, honestly, I'm most proud of the downfall of someone I hadn't even tried to

frame, yet somehow did with how the events rolled out. Someone I got to know very well at UA.

Shinsou.

His picture stares at me over the frame of my bed. He still has those horrible bags and unruly hairstyle. The picture isn't flattering by any means since it was obviously taken at an unfortunate moment for the hero, when he was either unaware or distracted as he was taken into custody for interrogation. He's looking away, his eyes dull, his expression slightly irritated. Probably. I always found him hard to read. But I couldn't have a better photo over my bed since this one proves to me what I now believe in.

Shinsou was investigated due to his infamous mind-controlling quirk and he is now the prime suspect in the case of the framed heroes. Of course, even the police aren't as stupid as to not realise that something is going on. It's all in the article that I've toasted to so many times already. It's my greatest achievement, and it wasn't even a part of my plan. I make sure to congratulate myself regularly for my genius.

Too bad they eventually let him go. I know they're still watching him, and there are tons and tons of theories on the internet about who's behind these strange villain-turned heroes. Some people think there is an actual villain behind all this, and others think he's made up, that it's just a theory the police have to make sure the civilians stay calm.

As to why I decided to call myself The Mask, it's because of the pretty little white mask I created not that long ago. It's simple, with hollow eyes for me to look through and a mouth frowning downwards.

I've been waiting for a moment to get my villain persona to make an appearance, and this is probably the best moment possible. I want to announce myself in the best way possible, and what better way than in the middle of a hero's speech?

Yes, Ground Zero is doing the honours of being my opening act, and he doesn't even know it yet. His scowling face has been plastered all over the internet for weeks, announcing his first public act in over a year. It's probably a promotion, a thing he's being forced to do by his manager so that he gains followers and attracts more attention. He's always been the hostile type, so it's probably nothing more than a publicity stunt, but that's good enough for me!

And today's the day! It's a great opportunity for me to show what The Mask can do! I can already imagine the headlines! "Strange masked villain humiliates Ground Zero".

I wear purple colour contacts and a dust mask to hide my features. I also wear a hood so my blond hair can't be seen - although in this day and age with all the quirks and mutations around I'm not that scared of a little pale hair showing - and I'm ready. I'm pretty confident I'm hiding my face well. Although I'm pretty sure not even my old schoolmates will remember me. The success has gone to their heads, they've let the slight fame they have to get to them. They think they're so much better than the random citizens they claim to be saving on the daily. Another reason I hate them so.

My long coat seals the deal. It's pretty similar to the one I wore back in high school, my hero suit. I modified a little, though. I changed the clocks for pockets. There are pockets everywhere, inside and out. In them are the samples of hair I've collected from heroes and villains with useful quirks over the years. I have their exact locations memorised for whenever I'm in a tight spot and I might need them. With my villain mask tucked neatly against my body, I head out the door and over to where Ground Zero's about to give his speech.

I blend in with the crowd as well as I can, positioning myself so I have a good enough view of him, security and as many people attending as I can.

He's a little over five minutes late, but he's as unceremonious as ever as he starts his little speech. The blond hero snarls viciously about how heroes will prevail despite everything and other nonsensical bullshit. I'm trying my hardest to stop myself from laughing, but it's impossible. It's just too funny.

Ground Zero is pathetic. In my opinion, he always has been. All he's really got going for himself is how boisterous he is. It's annoying. Most of the people here aren't even his fans, probably. They're just intimidated by his rudeness. It's sad. I know that hothead, bad-mouthed pro-hero thinks he's intimidating. He's got that air to him - and it's obviously the thing he's going for - but it doesn't work on me. He didn't intimidate me at the sports festival, and he doesn't intimidate me now.

But I do want to get back at him. I want to make him eat his words of all those years ago at the sports festival. I want him to regret having ever thought he was somehow superior to everyone else. I've wanted him to fall for so long now I can hardly wait.

And I know just how. His own cockiness will be his downfall, and nothing could be sweeter.

At some point during his boring talk, I sneak past people, repositioning myself. I discard my dust mask and replace it with my full-faced white one.

He's finally finished with his speech and is about to leave when I stuff my hand into the pocket with the hairs I'd carefully decided would be best for this situation. Activating my quirk I feel a surge of power travel up my hands and arms until my whole body is tingling with the sensation.

The thrill of the moment helps and I surge forward, pushing people out of my way until Ground Zero notices the commotion and turns his attention to me.

I see explosions form in his palms as he launches himself and lands on top of me. He's heavy, probably because his kit seems quite bulky and excessive. He laughs maniacally because he thinks he has me pinned to the floor and unable to move, but that's when I click my fingers in front of his face and his snickers quickly quieten. His expression turns from cocky to terrified in a matter of seconds, and I calmly pin him down.

He's struggling to breathe, clawing at his throat furiously, panic in his eyes as he

glares at me with a look of intense hate. I laugh once but push myself off him, running away and snapping my fingers again at anyone who tries to stop me.

I deactivate the quirk before I turn the corner and I immediately hear explosions behind me. I watch as he propels his way forward and lands right in front of me, grinning slyly. Ground Zero's close-up face is exactly how I remember it: Snide, smug and full of vile. His eyes look disturbed, and he's licking his lips like a madman. Life has given him many more scars that make his expressions far scarier than they should be. It would fill me with fear, but I'm too high on adrenaline to even care at this point.

"I'm not scared of your little breath-play trick." He snarls.

My smile spreads on my face, behind my mask. I tilt my head as I select the next quirk I'm going to use. It's an alchemy one I borrowed from a villain friend of mine. I put my hands on his grenades and melt the bloody artefacts before he can launch his explosions. It surprises him so much that he takes a step back and the immediate threat of being blown to pieces disappears as his explosions dissipate.

"What the-!" But I cut him off by pushing him back, turning his body and pressing him against a wall.

I can't risk it by using too many quirks or he'd understand what my ability is, so I use the first quirk on him again, cutting off his respiration.

I love watching him suffer. My heart beats erratically fast as I feel the hate emanating off of him. Yes, I live off that.

I pull his hair and force him to his knees as he's still struggling to get oxygen into his lungs. I jerk him around a bit, just to make sure I get at least one of his hairs, which I discreetly put into one of my empty pockets.

Satisfied with his torment, I pull back and walk away, only to turn a few seconds later and find him trying to crawl his way to me. Endearing. I wave at him before running down the street.

Despite the commotion and how important today is, loads of people are still walking around, unaware of what has just happened. I make my way through them, hoping they notice my mask but don't think too much into it.

As I expected, the bang of a loud explosion can be heard behind me. Ground Zero's drive and motivation to catch the enemy are as strong as ever. I'm not that happy that he's so persistent and still chasing me. I've got other heroes to antagonise! But the smell of smoke makes me turn my head to see just what this berserk man is doing nonetheless.

"I'LL KILL YOU!" I hear him scream before another huge explosion goes off. Turning to my left I notice the smoke coming from a building. Has he resorted to blowing up public property to gain my attention? Charming. Maybe I like Ground Zero more than I thought. I do love his taste for destruction, though, I'll give him that at least.

Running into a small alley to catch my breath, I put my hand inside a new pocket. An icky sensation sprouts from my fingertips as I activate this quirk and when I look at them, I find them covered in pink suckers. I can probably develop them on my feet too, but I'm not risking taking my shoes off, so I'll have to do with just my hands.

Climbing the wall with this quirk is easier than I imagined. It makes an annoying sucking sound as they activate and deactivate, but I get on the roof faster than I would've with any of my other quirks. I know Ground Zero can sort of fly, but at least I have a bit of an advantage for the time being.

I wish I could use his power since wow, it's super useful and dynamic, but I don't want to risk it. I know the blond hero isn't stupid. I mean, he isn't the smartest person I've ever met – blowing up buildings seems either a sign of his reckless stupidity or how desperate he is – but if I learnt something from our time together at UA, he can sometimes be quick and sharp, if he doesn't let his rash feelings get in the way. And right now, I'd rather not mess with that. Anyway, he's just a decoy for the real thing, or we could say he's the opening act. The show's about to start!

He must have spotted me because he whizzes his way towards the rooftop where I'm waiting for him, fire and loud bangs erupting from his hands and what's left of his melted grenades. There's a siren wailing in the background that I think was set off by his little temper tantrum. Good. He's done his part.

As much as I enjoyed fighting this admirable opponent, I've got better things to do, so I'm determined to finish this fast.

Bakugou's learnt his lesson, at least. He stays away from me, and he's wary this time, his brows furrowed. He's panting heavily, but I can see the light emanating from his palms, the tell-tale sign that he's about to make an explosion come to life.

I wish I was a little bit quicker or more agile since the tail of my coat gets singed by his explosive blast when I dodged it, but at least it didn't hit me and I'm not harmed. I select a new quirk that I know acts fast and it doesn't take long before he's asleep on the concrete floor, snoring softly. I give a kick to his inert body before walking off, laughing to myself.

I look back at the fire slowly creeping out of the litany of demolished buildings Ground Zero left in his wake as he chased after me. It's probably safe to assume someone else will follow the devastation and eventually reach me, unless I deceive them first, so I decide to jump from building top to building top. It's exhilarating in a way, as I stumble my way forwards, scared of falling. Heights were never my strong suit. But it feels good to defy even my fears as I walk across one roof to another, smiling to myself as I get further away from the smoky chaos I'm leaving behind.

I notice a figure with their back to the wall and the smirk reappears on my face. The person has purple hair, and a look I could recognise anywhere. Today's my lucky day it seems, as I activate the sucker quirk again and make my way down. As soon as my feet touch the ground, I'm met face to face with a very familiar one.

I've been waiting for this day for some time now, and now that it's finally here... I actually can't believe it. He doesn't recognize me under the mask, but his expression shifts, his eyes lighting up in interest.

"You're probably the one that caused all this commotion, right?" He says, his tone dull, as if he were bored, but there's a certain something in his voice that's new. He's sure of himself.

Well, it'll make all this a lot more fun.

I don't answer him of course, because this is Hitoshi Shinsou we're talking about, bearer of a very powerful mind control quirk. Answering him would mean dooming not only myself but all the villains I know and every one of my ideals.

I decide to toy around with him, play a game that has been on my mind for ages now. I walk towards him, tilting my masked face to the left just slightly. It's to intimidate him, although he'll probably not fall for that. I've always thought he was a tough nut to crack, and that's part of the beauty of this.

We dance around each other as he tries to mimic my motions until I throw a punch. He dodges it and aims his knee towards my stomach, but boy am I glad my reflexes are still good. With one hand on his face and pushing him back – mainly to distract and annoy him – the other fumbles inside one of my pockets, to acquire the quirk I want. Before Shinsou manages to pull away from my grasp, I feel power surge through my veins and explosions light up in my palms.

I don't aim for his face because I've always kind of thought he was beautiful, in a weird non-crush sort of way. Maybe I was jealous, maybe I wasn't, it's not the time to ponder about high school drama. Plus, I need to make sure he's recognisable later on. I blast the loud explosion with calculated carefulness. His shoulder should've received the brunt of the blow, but I underestimated how quick he is too. He dodges the explosion, but it leaves a big crater in the wall behind him, debris raining over us and smoke clouding our vision. As I sneak in a quick peek, I notice I destroyed the back of the lovely café that I went to the other day. It's a shame, I did really like that place.

He tackles me to the ground and we wrestle. I'm not really a fan of hand to hand combat so my objective is to get him off me as soon as possible, but only when I have what I need. My hands run over his hair and I acquire his power, feeling it well up intensely inside of me.

He struggles to take my mask off, but I don't let him. A swift kick in his tender spot makes him recoil and I can finally pull myself from under him. I get up and watch as he struggles to do the same, moving agonizingly slowly.

I walk back a few steps and take my time removing my mask, savouring the moment. My smirk is ever-present as I watch his expression shift. He's still in pain from my kick but he's still trying to fight me. Admirable. I should give these persistent heroes that.

Shinsou's mouth opens wide as he realises who stands in front of him. His arms fall limp to his side as he stammers a hushed "But... you died".

He stumbles back as realisation kicks in and panic appears on his features. "You were the one that caused all that! You're behind everything. Your quirk-!"

But it's too late for him because I activate my quirk, and then his. I watch as his eyes change to look like the ones he's so used to seeing himself. Having him under my command ignites a warm feeling inside of me, something akin to triumphant pride as I smile smugly at him.

"Hitoshi Shinsou." I whisper in a sickly-sweet tone. I take my time with each syllable, savouring the moment. I've got complete control over him and It's empowering. "Now that's a name I haven't said in a long time. But as much as I like reunions, I like things going my way more. So, listen closely. You are going to turn yourself in. You'll tell the police you are behind every one of those heroes that were arrested."

For a second Shinsou doesn't move. It's as if he's trying to control his own quirk. But we both know he's not strong enough to do that.

"Now," I growl, my lip curling.

His whole body twitches before he turns around and starts walking away. Just at the perfect time, too, since Ground Zero must have woken up: his screams and violent explosions can be heard in the distance.

I laugh hoarsely, imagining the warm welcome the other hero has planned for Shinsou.

I turn in the opposite direction myself, walking towards the other end of the small street, my mask still in my hand. It feels heavy there, and I suddenly realise that it's because I don't need it anymore. With a quick movement of my left wrist, I throw it away.

I laugh as I walk into a busier street, a light skip in my step, only to stop in front of a toddler. The kid looks at me with big brown curious eyes, and I stare back at him before leaning down and taking his lollipop. The young boy just watches me dumbfounded as I put the sweet into my mouth, enjoying the soft "plop" it makes around my puckered lips.

It seems like a scene in a movie as I walk away from the small child, who's stunned into silence as he watches me run off with his lollipop.





# OF A FLOWER PLACED IN THE ALCOVE

by shimikonde

A gentle sea breeze blows through Momo's hair. The wind is damp against her skin, smelling of brine and wet sand, and it makes the grass tickle her ankles. She sits in her white sunflower-print dress and gazes up at a baby blue sky as a pair of silent red and pink fireworks shoot up to fill it. They explode up and out from beside her, winding through the air in colorful patterns. As she watches them, Momo feels a sense of unease. It's the middle of the day and they're far too close.

The little dots of red and pink fall down to the earth, splashing over her and the grass to stain everything in their colors. It reminds her of last month, when a girl in her class tripped while carrying a cup of blue paint and sent it cascading across the classroom.

Momo had gotten it all over herself then, too.

But this is different.

The red is hot and sticky. She doesn't taste chalk, but copper and salt, so heavy in the air that she can feel the taste thick in her lungs. She looks down at her dress and sees other colors, too—little pebbles of white and globules of yellow and grey. Strands of pink twitch like worms in the puddle of red at her feet. And she doesn't understand. She can't understand.

She tries to ask her parents, but they're gone, replaced with paint, worms, and multi-colored lumps, and someone she's never seen before stands behind the lawn chairs they'd been sitting in. Red covers him from head to toe, drips thick and dark from his three-piece suit and mattes down his hair. His hands are raised out in front of him, and he lowers them back to his sides, shaking the red and pink from them.

It's hard to tell what he is at first. He is a beak, pointed and crow-like. He is a moving red smear. He is a pair of golden eyes freezing over in a sea of her parents' blood.

And then those eyes turn to her and she recognizes the cold glint in them, and that's how she knows that he's like her: human.

Yakuza.

She pushes herself from the ground as he takes a step toward her, finally feeling the panic, fluttering and nauseating in her stomach. It smothers her as she looks to either side for help, but her parents are gone. There are only two people in the backyard of the seaside villa: her and him.

No one will save her

So she doesn't run. Her parents have always taught her not to run if someone

comes for her when they're not there, so she doesn't run as he walks closer, dripping, wet grass squelching under his feet, a hand reaching out for her. Momo watches him approach with wide eyes and she does not run.

Once he's close enough, he presses a finger to her shoulder and asks, "What's your quirk?" The question is as harsh and cold as his eyes, like falling onto a sheet of ice.

"Creation." Her knees tremble but her voice doesn't. She's rehearsed what to say so many times by now that the words don't feel like hers as they come out of her mouth, distant and echoing, void of meaning. "The same as my mother."

Momo sees his smile in the line of his cheeks. He moves to grip her shoulder in his hand, hard enough that she wants to whine.

"Be a good girl and I'll let you live," he says.

It's only then that Momo realizes her parents are dead.

Her father often said there was no clean end for men like him, and she's been prepared all her life for the eventuality that her parents won't be there for her anymore. Even so, their death is not at all like how she'd imagined it.

Momo had always thought she would cry.

Instead, she feels nothing. She feels everything and nothing, like her nerves are straining against her skin, trying to escape from a body that isn't hers. She feels floaty and numb, like she's watching everything happen from atop a cloud.

She doesn't run, and she doesn't cry.

At eleven years old, Momo looks up at her parents' killer and tells him, "I'll be good."

From an early age, Momo's mother taught her that she would be underestimated. People would underestimate her for her sex and for her age, and most of all for her beauty. A powerful woman, she said, was not one who fought to be perceived as powerful despite these things, but one who understood peoples' expectations of her and knew how to take advantage of them.

She explained yakuza society as a tokonoma. It was an alcove hidden in the wall, designed to be unnoticeable until someone stepped too close. The men were the kakemono, bold, eye-catching displays of ink hung broad across the façade of the wall, while the women were the perfectly-manicured ikebana that accompanied them, slim and beautiful and terrifyingly delicate. That was how she was to conduct herself: always daintily, always fragilly, as if she could hardly stand on her own two feet unless there was a man there to hold her up.

So, Momo lets the members of Shie Hassaikai think that she's a flower on a shelf, raised without a purpose but to garnish whatever room she's been placed in. They tell her to make precious metals and complex alloys and teach her about chemical compounds in the hopes that she will be able to produce those for them, too, and she does as she's told. She reads the books that they give her slowly, repeatedly, asks them to explain the same concepts over and over again in a sweet voice, and she knows that they underestimate her because they always oblige her.

Her mother had only been able to produce minerals and chemicals with her quirk. Momo lets them think that hers is the same.

In exchange for her obedience, she is rewarded. The room that they lock her in at night grows in size, gains a fluffy bed and a carpet as well as rows of bookshelves lining the walls. As long as Momo meets her quotas, she can have whatever she wants, and to fit the caricature she's cast herself as she demands dresses, sweets, and teen-oriented magazines. The man she comes to know as Overhaul takes to calling her his golden goose, while the people he orders to keep watch over her sneer from behind their masks and tell her how lucky she is.

For nearly two years, she was the princess of the Shie Hassaikai.

And then, one day, Chisaki finally agrees to let her go on a drive outside.

It's only for five minutes, only in the alleys, only with the windows rolled up, and only with one of his expendables driving her, but it's the first time she's been let aboveground since the day her parents died and the fresh air feels like a song as it blows through her hair.

The temptation to escape is hot under her skin the entire time. It runs through her nerves and makes it hard to sit properly with her back against the seat, but Momo isn't hasty. She watches buildings pass from behind the blacked-out mirror and keeps her hands folded demurely on her lap, because she knows a test when she sees one, and that is the only reason she can imagine Overhaul letting her out of her cell.

When the car pulls back into the compound, Overhaul is waiting for her, and she can tell by the way he stares at her evenly, unblinking, that he had not been expecting her to pass.

She gives him a reserved smile and thanks her driver, and then allows herself to be taken back down to her room.

A few weeks later, she's granted a second, similarly uneventful trip out.

After her fifth outing, Overhaul stops waiting for her.

Still, she doesn't try anything until half a year later, on her seventeenth outing, when the expendable who'd been assigned to drive her starts coughing on air and has to pull over for a drink of water. He lifts his mask up over his eyes, and that's

when she reaches under her shirt to pull a knife from her stomach. It's long, with a hard rubber handle and a serrated blade, and when she plunges it into his neck it cuts through his flesh like tofu.

The man shouts. He drops the bottle of water and reaches blindly for his throat, his quirk turning his fingertips a poisonous purple. Before the blood can coat her hands or the man can touch her, Momo turns her fist so that the serrated edge is facing outward and pulls it back out and to the side with all her strength.

The blade flays his skin open. His blood looks like liquid tar as the wound hemorrhages, thick and black. He clamps his hands over his neck as if to keep the blood in his body, but it just flows through the gaps between his fingers as he gurgles and foams pink at the lips.

If she's done it right, he'll be dead in five minutes.

It only takes two for him to lose consciousness and she doesn't wait longer than that.

The passenger doors are child-locked, so she exits from the driver's door, crawling over the man as he bleeds out. The blood showers her as she passes, covers his lap and soaks her knees, dying her all over in its color. As she exits the car and drops to a kneel on the pavement, it feels sickeningly familiar against her skin.

For a moment, she stares at the knife in her hand—red and dripping, hot and wet and viscid, cooling against her skin and so red—and her head spins as it tries to wrap around what she's done.

There will be time to think about it later when she's somewhere safe, she has to remind herself.

She retches on the sidewalk before standing on unsteady legs and leaning back into the car to fish her driver's phone from his pocket. Her hands are wet with blood and they slip over the buttons as she dials her uncle's number, praying that he hasn't either died or changed his number since her parents had made her memorize it.

A voice answers on the second ring, gruff and half-slurred, and Momo recognizes it.

She chokes on the feeling, her heart squeezing in her chest, and she's so relieved that she can't even make out what the man is saying.

"Uncle, it's Momo," she says, voice shattering as it leaves her. "I need help."

Momo and her uncle are not genetically related. Back before Momo had been born, before her father had married her mother or made a name for himself, back when the two of them had been stupid kids not much older than she is, he and her father had exchanged sakazuke. Her uncle had promised to always act as her

father's younger brother, and her father had promised that he would carry her uncle with him all the way to the top. He'd been there on the day Momo was born, had been right there every step along the way as she grew up.

So, although she isn't related by blood, she feels the same familial connection as he wraps her blood-soaked body in his designer suit jacket and cries wetly into her hair. He welcomes her into his car, into his house, and into his life like breathing. Like he doesn't have to think about it.

Later, he tells her that he'd always known that one of them was alive—her or her mother. There has been too much rhodium and gold on the market to be explained otherwise. "I'd always assumed it would be your mother," he confesses, his lips twisting around the thick scar cut through them. And then he looks at her through furrowed brows and eyes that beg whether he's said too much.

She realizes that he'd probably wished that it was her mother who had survived instead.

"It's a shame mother died," Momo says, and her uncle doesn't dispute it, giving a stiff nod. She expects the confirmation to hurt, but it doesn't.

Shortly after arriving at her uncle's house, she is assigned a tutor. She'll be attending school starting in the spring, her uncle says, which only gives her a few months to get caught up on all of the things she's missed in the last two years. He says it like it's a challenge, but the material is easy compared to what she's had to read and memorize with the Shie Hassaikai. She appreciates that it keeps her mind busy all the same.

Every day over breakfast, they talk about the weather. If it's nice out, her uncle encourages her to go out, but Momo feels the most secure locked in her room with the key snug in her pocket, so that is most often where she stays.

She regrets not listening to him when she has to start school.

Momo enrolls as a transfer student under the name Sakuraba Chie, a sickly girl with an imagined heart problem. Her father had always wanted her to grow up as a functioning member of normal society, so she knows what it's like to go to public schools. She's experienced the large groups of students and the clique mentality, and she thinks that she's prepared for it. Even before she walks into the classroom, she realizes that she isn't.

The commute is the worst. For added safety, she's sent to a school in Nagano, which means that every day she must spend no less than forty minutes sitting in the back seat of a car, staring out at the countryside through blacked-out windows. She never used to get carsick, but now she feels it almost as soon as the smell of leather enters her nose. Whenever a car passes, she finds herself tensing, hands flat against her bare skin, just in case she needs to pull something from herself.

Comparatively, school itself isn't so bad. The number of people who crowd her make her feel uncomfortable, but by that point acting fair is so easy for her that she falls back on it like a crutch. She's immediately different from the other students, smarter and more refined, more mature than them. Within the very first day, she finds herself placed on a pedestal by her classmates and teachers alike. Wherever she goes, their gazes cling to her skin, watching everything she does like she's a toy put up too high for them to reach.

They ask her what her quirk is. She tells them that she's quirkless and it makes her all the more exotic in their eyes.

Momo spends a lot of time in the nurse's office using her supposed heart condition as an excuse. She goes there when the feeling of being watched gets to be like smoke in her lungs, or on days when she finds herself too afraid to turn corners for the thought of who might be waiting on the other side of them. She tells herself that the fear will fade with time, but it never does.

When her uncle asks her about how her classes are, she always says that she's fine. Her grades are excellent, so he has no reason to question it. He often scratches the spot atop his head where his hair is thinning, but he doesn't know how to connect with her any more than she would know how to open up to him. Ultimately, they both decide to leave the issue be.

He looks more vexed than surprised when she tells him that she doesn't plan to attend high school the following year. "What will you do, then?" he asks, running a hand across his forehead like she's given him a headache.

It makes her feel guilty, but she doesn't think she can handle another year of school surrounded by strangers in a world she doesn't truly belong. She knows she cannot handle another year of constantly looking over her shoulder, always on the lookout for monsters she can never be sure are of her own imagining. For her, the only way forward is to carve herself a new path out of the backs of her nightmares, so she folds her hands in her lap and refuses to let them shake as her uncle stares her down.

"Kill Overhaul," she says.

Part of her is proud of how confidently the words leave her mouth. The other part regrets them as soon as they have.

Her uncle sighs, long and deep, as if he's been expecting this. "You've got all your father's fire hidden behind your mother's manners," he tells her, shaking his head.

"I want a tattoo." She knows he won't like it, but he's never been able to say no to her.

"If Hiroaki were alive, he would have my tongue for this."

"My father's dead," Momo reminds him.

His voice softens, growing quiet, and Momo thinks he sounds sad as he agrees, "Aye, he is."

They begin inking lines on her back on Momo's fifteenth birthday. Sixty hours is to be spread over two months before it's completed. She decides on a phoenix, spread fiery across her shoulder blades in crimson and gold, diving down to spear the eyes of a black-and-yellow dragon with its talons. The dragon clutches a dead lotus in its claws and writhes in spirals on a bed of mud as wind-scattered cherry blossoms blow across the scene. Upon seeing the sketch on paper, Momo's uncle tells her that the symbolism is so transparent that it's embarrassing to look at, but Momo doesn't mind—the tattoo is only for her, and she thinks the stronger the message, the better.

She's told it will hurt.

It does.

The needle burns as it pierces through her skin, the pain sharp and throbbing, dull and acute all at once. But after spending so long feeling numb and afraid, it feels as if the pain is baptizing her, like it's washing away the person she once was to make room for what she must become. Even after the swelling goes down, the skin on her back feels tighter with the ink in it, like it's scarred over and leathery. The first time Momo touches it, she's shocked to find that it's slightly elevated compared to the skin around it but no less smooth than it was before.

She spends minutes at a time mesmerized by the sight of it in the mirror, of her fingers as they run over it. If it weren't for the memory of the pain, she might have thought it was an illusion.

Momo had expected the feeling of permanence that came with the tattoo. She'd already set her resolve by the time she spoke to her uncle, but she knew that getting the tattoo and seeing it on her, a physical representation of her rejection of a normal life, would be different.

She had expected to feel more conflicted.

When Overhaul approaches the League of Villains, the news hits the underground like a bolt of lightning, loud and so eye-catching that everyone is forced to pay attention, from the lowest pickpocket all the way up to the corrupt officials who line their pockets with ill-gotten gains. When the rumors hit Momo's ears, she smells opportunity on them, fresh and dangerous like ozone after a storm. Because anyone who knows a thing about Overhaul knows that, to him, an alliance is just another name for a subjugation, and any allies who fail to bend knee will inevitably end up on the wrong side of him.

It seems unlikely to her that the group of villains endorsed by The Hero Killer Stain and powerful enough to end All Might's career will be willing to bend knee to

Overhaul's ambitions.

At her request, her uncle introduces her to a drunk man who calls himself Giran. Momo greets him with a handshake full of diamonds and says she would like to speak to the leader of the LOV, and he gives her a slimy smile as he counts them, telling her he'll see what he can do.

Within a week, she finds herself at the edge of town in an abandoned factory that's less a building than it is a concrete box, wrapped in yellow tape and protected with a sheet of paper marking it for destruction. Deep cracks line the walls and the floor is covered in dust and shattered pieces of cement from the holes in the ceiling, but it appears hardly as worn as their leader does. She knows it's him, because her uncle has told her about the hand he wears over his face, but he looks younger than she expects, and shockingly arid. It looks like he's been left for years to bleach in the sun. It's in the ashen dead skin against his black clothes, in the sound that his broken, untrimmed nails rake against his neck—like dry grass—and it's even in the redness of his eyes, inspecting her carefully as she walks in.

She does not waver, heading straight to where he's perched upon a couch that smells of mildew, his feet resting on the scratched-up coffee table.

A lizardman dressed in scraps steps between the two of them before she can get far, his hand on the hilt of a blade. He asks if she's taken a wrong turn somewhere, and she gives him a patient smile because she supposes they all must have to have ended up where they are.

Without responding otherwise, she folds her hands in front of herself and turns to their leader, feeling the smile on her face cool. "I believe we share a common interest."

"Being?" His movements are loose and jerky as cocks his head to the side, as if to get a better look at her.

"The removal of Shie Hassaikai."

Between the fingers on his mask, Momo sees his eyes narrow. "It's just one thing after another with you yakuza types." He leans forward, the couch creaking under him. As he continues, his voice hisses through his teeth, sounding like velcro to her ears. "You better have a fucking good pitch, because my patience is running thin."

The hair on the back of her neck stands up and her stomach does somersaults at the tension in the air. She ignores the sound of a blade unsheathing to the left of her as she takes a step forward, holding a hand over the coffee table.

"Watch it," says the green man as something sharp presses against her neck—and for a second her eyes widen as she recalls a neck flapping open and blood like tar flowing from it. The blade pricks her skin and she hesitates, her lips parting for a gasp that she forces silent.

Momo closes her mouth with purpose. She's so accustomed to using her quirk that she barely has to think about it anymore. Her hand flashes with color, and suddenly their leader is leaping off the couch at her as the tip of the knife pricks into her skin.

A hand shoots out at her, stopping just short as a solid block of gold drops from her palm onto the table, filling the room with a crack, like splitting wood.

Dust settles in clouds between them and the leader slowly lowers his hand. He looks down at the table for a moment, and then back up at her.

"Is that all you have?" he asks.

"I can make as much as you need. Gold, jewelry, drugs, weapons, counterfeits. I can make anything you need in as much quantity as you need it. I think it's a good deal for you."

He reaches forward to heft up the block of gold, turning it over in his hands and holding it up to his eyes.

"It's pure," Momo assures him, although she doesn't expect he'll trust her until it's been tested. His tone has less of an edge to it when he speaks, though, as if amused by something.

"And your condition?"

"I want you to give me Overhaul. Alive."

A man with a patchwork face huffs a laugh, leaning against the far wall near the door she'd walked through. Momo doesn't know if he's just come in or if she hadn't even noticed he was there.

"You his fan or something?" the man asks.

She tries to smile and a grimace spreads across her face instead, brows knitting together. "Something like that."

"Kids your age are scary," he says, breezily like it's a joke, and then looks to the man on the couch. "What do you think? We could use some extra income."

Their leader sets the gold back down on the table and considers in silence for a moment, scratching his neck idly. His eyes don't leave her the whole time, and she knows that he's analyzing her, because he must trust her as little as she trusts him.

He tells her to come back in two days with as many valuables as she can make in that time, and they can talk then.

She arrives two days later in a moving van full of precious metals and stones,

and the leader introduces himself as Shigaraki Tomura. He says that she's to bring one such van a week, and Momo says it's a pleasure to do business with him. She never tells him of the second van she's prepared, hidden back with her uncle, just in case.

Overhaul's life is surprisingly cheap, she thinks.  
~

She estimates it will take a year.

It only takes a month.

The heroes did most of the work, Shigaraki explains to her over the phone. The LOV just came in at the end to reap the rewards after the heavy lifting was done.

She thanks them and takes a driver to the veritable dump site at which they've specified to meet, feeling a numb sense of anticlimax as she looks out the window and notes that the leaves haven't even changed color yet.

As Momo sees him lying there, strapped down onto the blocky bed doubling as his holding cell, she feels something buzzing in her ears and all through her body, but she doesn't recognize the emotion. He looks like a corpse, she thinks. His skin is pale and almost grey under the fluorescent lights, both of his arms are gone, dried blood clinging brown to his clothes and skin, flaking off his face. His eyes are sunken and look tarnished when he gazes emptily up at her, like he doesn't recognize the person in front of him, either. For a moment, she thinks that he won't, and the world spins sickeningly around her. Perhaps he'd forgotten about her—perhaps she's been safe and free this entire time—perhaps she's thrown away her life for nothing—

But then a spark catches in his eye and he comes back to life, breath hissing between his teeth.

You, his eyes say, blue lips struggling to form the word, but Momo holds her serenity like a knife, silencing him with a smile that tells him to wait his turn before turning to Shigaraki.

"What happened to his arms?" she asks.

Shigaraki doesn't even smirk. He shrugs innocuously, like he'd misplaced the remote, and says, "You just said alive."

Maybe he thinks she'll be bothered. She probably should be, considering they'd had a deal and he hadn't even consulted her, but she's honestly surprised that he's fulfilled his end of the bargain at all. It would've been smarter for him to hold Overhaul over her head so they could squeeze her for all that she had.

Momo asks for some privacy. They seem to give it to her out of apathy more than respect.

Only when the two of them are alone does she hazard another look back down to Overhaul.

The air comes out of his lungs in soft wheezes, like he's struggling through every breath, and he swallows to try and clear his throat but he still can't quite find his voice. Without thinking, she pulls a glass from her arm and pours water into it straight from her fingertips. His head is limp in her hand as she lifts it, damp with sweat and shockingly heavy. He pulls a disgusted expression when she puts the glass to his lips but drinks anyway. The back of his throat tenses against her every time he swallows, the feeling so human that it makes her hair stand on end. She drops his head back down onto the bed before he can finish, and it hits with a loud thunk that makes his face screw up, the rest of the water splashing down on his face.

She always imagined she'd feel something like pride or anger as she stood over the man who killed her parents. She never thought she'd feel so disappointed.

But as she looks down at Overhaul, all she sees is a dying man.

When he opens his eyes, they're rimmed with red and swimming. He clears his throat and looks up at her, and she wishes that he won't speak but he does, hoarse and breathy. "My golden goose..."

It doesn't feel right to call him Overhaul, so she answers, "Chisaki."

"So this is where you went." His voice goes thick at the end as he tries and fails to stave off a fit of coughing.

She waits for him to quiet before speaking.

"You know," she says, her voice sounding distant in her ears, rehearsed. "My father mentioned you to me once. It was after he met with the former head. He could see in your eyes that you were going to go far. He said it was a waste that someone with eyes like yours was trapped in a dying world like the yakuza." She pauses, her eyes finding his missing arms. "It seems Shigaraki has already taken care of your yubitsume."

He looks up at her, tired. "I won't beg for my life."

"It wouldn't change anything if you did."

Letting him live would be crueler than torturing him. He's powerless, helpless, hopeless—doomed to live trapped in his own body with the knowledge that he has nothing and no one. Momo could leave him here for the police to find and he'd have to spend the rest of his life alone, learning how to live with himself. The thought is tempting, if only because she finds that she doesn't particularly want to kill him in the first place.

But this isn't just about her.

So she pulls a short knife from her palm, the blade sharp and curved, and she says, "Back when my father was alive, there was something he was famous for. Do you remember?" He must, because his eyes widen and dart to the knife, but he doesn't answer so she continues. "It was for his interrogations. They say he was particularly good at flaying people, and had taste for peeling the tattoos off of his enemies and hanging them on the walls of his torture rooms. Usually, just the sight of them alone was enough to get people to talk."

"You have nothing to gain from torturing me," he tells her.

She nods, an empty, bitter smile creeping on her lips. "But you killed my parents, so I'm afraid I must."

When she makes the first cut, she's expecting it to be like the man she killed when she was thirteen. She thinks it will make her sick to her stomach and that she'll barely be able to get through a few centimeters of skin before she gives up and has to end it, but it's not anything like she's imagined. On the contrary, as she watches the red gather along the cuts she makes, watches it bead and drip, pooling on the table and then splashing down on the floor, it's cathartic.

This is for you, she tells her father as she takes the skin off of Chisaki's chest. And this is for you, she tells her mother as she works her way to his shoulders.

Then she gets up to his neck, and she knows that she doesn't have the skill to do the same there. Her hands are slippery and shaking, too clumsy with a knife to take off the skin clean, so she stands behind him and touches the blade to his throat.

And this is for me.

Momo's never been able to properly mourn her parents. She's prayed to the pictures of them that decorate her uncle's butsudan, but she was unable to attend their funeral, and she's never visited their graves for fear of a trap. Even now, her emotions are as callused as they were before, buried deep under something hard and impenetrably thick, so she can't cry for them. Instead, she closes her eyes and listens to the gentle trickling of Chisaki's life draining on the floor, and it's okay. She listens, eyes closed, and it's like she's crying.

It feels as if she's finally stealing back all of the tears he'd taken from her over the years.

Somewhere in the back of her mind, she knows it should concern her how little remorse she feels at having killed a man, but it doesn't. When she opens her eyes and sees him lying there, cold and still on his deathbed, it feels right, and it occurs to her that this must have been what her father was talking about.

There was no clean end for men like him.

Her own end, she supposed, would find her much the same.



# ENDARKENED STARS

by kiroiimye

The first stars Shouta sees are simple. He's a mere child at the time (only six years old), and he remembers a roof and feet dangling off the edge. The palms of his hands are pressed back against the bricks, rough and scraping to the touch, but he doesn't feel it. For when he's a child, he is born with stars in his eyes and vision that only sees the brimming surface and nothing underneath.

The world is vast and unknown, and he wants to see it all. The night stars are simply night stars--it's just a dream to reach as high as they are, to go as far as they are. For six year old Shouta, the stars are just stars and nothing more, nothing less, than a beautiful view.

---

When Shouta turns ten, the stars turn blue. They burn like a spark, igniting the fire of curiosity and wonder that children that age hold. He's fearless, because he's ten and nothing can change the world for him, for he stands atop it: triumphant, uncaring, unstoppable. There's no way he can see the world for what it is...can he?

Shouta had thought so as he clambered around the playground with the other children. Had let himself be surrounded by his peers, letting his eyes grow wide in awe at the oh-so magnificent wonders; of the boy whose hands danced with flames, the girl who emitted a scent that was far too sweet, a boy who bent fabric to his will. And they had turned to him, eyes glimmering, and Shouta had shown his Quirk. The curling fire: extinguished. The perfumey scent in the air: gone. The threads of the fabric: dropped limp.

The whispers had started when Shouta was ten.

*Freak. Outcast. Useless.*

Shouta has full intentions of being a hero that everyone adores and he won't let anyone or anything stop him. So Shouta learns to bite his tongue, to keep his head held high, and stand, shoulders firm. For what kind of hero would let himself get down over something so trivial?

(The stars were once an enlightened blue, brilliant in all their glory, but with every passing day and vicious whisper, the blue dulls and darkens.)

---

*Freak.* The word cuts on his skin like a knife sinking into butter (Shouta scratches the word into the bathroom wall).

*Outcast.* It hurts like a bitch, choking him until his throat closes, raw and gasping (He pulls his sweatshirt farther over his arms, desperate to cover the bruises and cuts from the fights after school).

*Useless.* A blow to the stomach, the wind knocked out of him, and he's too numb, unable to move (Another hole in the walls of his room, more bloody knuckles. But it's not like anyone cares, not like his drunken father or whore mother gives a damn about the shambles of their house and their son). Shouta trudges home, body trembling that early evening, and he's the only one on the sidewalk (everyone else chooses to walk on the other side). The cars come every now and then (the passengers spit and throw bottles at his feet). He's alone, so very alone, but it's something he's used to at fifteen years old, because there's no one to tell him that things will get better.

There's a tap on his shoulder as he passes an alley, and it's full instinct to grab the arm and slam the offender down

"The fuck you want with me?" he snaps, leering down at the guy.

It's a male, middle-aged, and he's dressed like a street urchin, with tattered clothes and a grime-covered face that hadn't been washed in ages (Shouta can relate. He doesn't remember the last time his family paid the bills).

He doesn't speak and Shouta curses at him, kicking his side. "Well? Talk, asshole. And before you ask, no. I don't have any money."

The man growls, low from his throat, and shooting Shouta a glare as he coughs up blood. He sits up on the sidewalk, vomiting blood onto the street, before he gets to his feet wearily. "You're tough kid, I'll give you that."

"Who the hell are you calling kid?" he hisses. "And literally, fuck off. I'm not giving you anything."

"We've been watching you," the man interrupts sharply. "We've been watching you for a while, and you seem like our kind of person."

His breath stinks of the streets, of moldy foods and alcohol, and Shouta takes a step back. He doesn't trust this guy, but at the same time, he feels a slight pull to him, as if they were meant to meet.

"Oh yeah?" he challenges, folding his arms. "And what kind of person are you?"

"A villain," the man says simply.

*Villain.* The word is like a slap (a reminder of all the words he's tattooed across his body. *Freak. Outcast. Useless*), and he tenses himself to fight, narrowing his eyes at the man.

"I'm not like you," Shouta says defiantly and he puts as much force as he can into his voice. "I'm not. I'm going to go to U.A. and I'm going to be a hero. You've got the wrong guy." He feels his voice waver at the end, and he grimaces slightly; he hopes the other man hasn't heard him.

To his annoyance, the man merely laughs, hearty and deep. "A hero?! Kid, you have got to be kidding."

"I'm not!" Shouta's voice is almost a shout. "I'm going to be a hero and I'm going to save lives, so take your goddamn offer somewhere else."

"Heroes don't beat other kids up. Heroes don't graffiti the walls, or get into fights every other week, or skip class every other day." The man's voice turns bitter.

"Heroes are loved. Heroes are respected. Heroes are perfection. Heroes don't get called names." He narrows his eyes at Shouta, lips curling at his disheveled appearance. "Now, you may say you're gonna be a hero, and sure, do what you want. You can be anything you want to be, but...Wouldn't it be better to get back at the people who said you were useless?"

*Freak. Outcast. Useless.*

Shouta opens his mouth to speak, to say anything, to defend himself, but nothing comes out. He can't talk because it hurts how much of what he said is true and it burns that he oh so desperately wants to get back at every person who called him a freak, outcast, *useless*.

The villain must see the torn look on his face, because he laughs and claps him on the back. "Think it over kid. Really. And when you have an answer, head down to the pub at the end of the street."

He disappears back into the alley, leaving Shouta once more alone.

—

A group of kids spit at his feet on his way to school.

Shouta doesn't even think twice about turning on his heel and marching to the pub.

(The stars are black that night, and they don't ever light again.)

—

*Twenty years later...*

—

His hair whips behind him as he flits through the air like a bat. It's one of his favorite parts of the job; the wind threading through his hair and screaming against his ears as he flies soundless in the night. And then, the drop: a pause midair, no noise at all, before the fall, the whistling loud as ever.

Shouta drops onto the building roof, eyes searching the empty night, before he opens the trapdoor beneath his feet and clammers down the ladder.

The pipe is dirty, and he knows it by the sound of the scurrying feet and rotting stench all around. The smell gets to him and he has to freeze in his spot, breathe in, out of his mouth, and continue climbing, down down down. His feet eventually touch bottom and he grimaces as he lands in a puddle, before trekking onwards. He walks for some way, barely sparing a glance at the tracker on his belt before he stops at the meeting point, and the tracker begins to beep. Late, he thinks idly. He's never been a fan of people who were late. Shouta's a busy man; he doesn't have time to spare. He flicks a glance at his watch: 4:24am. Four minutes past. He had to be getting back to U.A. soon.

There's a soft splash in the distance, alerting Shouta to a presence. keeps his eyes alert, body tense, even once he catches sight of the person he's supposed to be meeting.

The villain is dressed in black, head to toe, and he looks like a henchman than a final boss, but he carries a briefcase besides him and well...Shouta likes to keep his eyes on the prize.

"You're late," he says sharply, his voice echoing in the tunnels.

"You're the one with demands. You need me more than I need you," the villain says, dropping the briefcase to fold his eyes and glare. He does his best to look menacing, but Shouta suppresses a scoff; his look could barely scare a second grader.

"And I'm the one who did the dirty work you asked for. We're even," he replies bluntly, matching the dark stare. "Now, hand me the briefcase and I'll give you the head you asked for."

"Head first. And then you get your stuff."

Figuring he wasn't going to get anywhere with this idiot, Shouta releases a sigh before unslinging the bag from his shoulder and tossing it to the other. "The head of your competition, as you asked for. Neck and all."

The villain examines his new prize before dropping the bag at his feet and raising a gun. "Thanks for your dirty work. Time to silence you, once and for all," he jeers and there's the soft click of the gun. "Say bye bye."

The shot fires through the air, and Shouta shifts the side, letting it fly past. "Work on your aim. And maybe know who you're hiring first," he says lazily, before springing into action.

He starts with the arms, his delicate knives slicing through limbs, letting them fall before he moves in for the kill. The poor villain doesn't stand a chance as Shouta punctures his chest and throat in a flurry of movement, letting him drop to the ground with a sickening splash. Shouta kicks the body aside and grabs the briefcase. He doesn't spare a glance back as he climbs up the pipe once more.

—

"Class dismissed!" Shouta shouts over the blare of the bell. "See you all after school for training."

"Yes sir!" The class begins to file out the door in pairs and groups, chattering about nonsensical things, and Shouta sighs, dropping his head to his desk and running a hand through his dark hair, before pulling on his reading glasses. He had an excessive amount of paperwork to grade and the late night mission hadn't helped matters. Through his exhaustion, he doesn't notice the figure in the doorway, until he makes himself known.

"So those kids, huh? Problem children, am I right?" Yamada smirks, leaning against the doorway. "Are they softening your heart, Shouta?"

"As if. Get the hell out, I'm grading," Shouta shoots the hero a dirty look from beneath his reading glasses, eliciting a laugh from the other.

"Nah, I'm good!" Yamada crosses the room in three long strides and sits on a desk. "Anyways, you seem different. Having a change of heart, Shouta?"

Yamada had begun to press the question upon discovering Shouta's double life, and hadn't stopped, in hopes of finding an answer that wouldn't be there. Shouta chooses not to indulge him, glaring wearily at Yamada, who merely grins at him in reply. "Are you ever going to leave?"

"Not until you answer my question."

The underground hero sighs and pulls off his reading glasses, placing them next to his lamp, along with an engraved wooden pen.

Dadzawa!

"Why does it matter?" he asks, leaning back. "My answer won't change and even if I really wanted to, I can't change anything about who I am, or what I do."

"On the contrary, my dear Shouta, I think those kids make all the difference." Yamada's green eyes flick towards the pen on his desk. "You care for them, don't you? More than you ever have anything."

"They've...grown on me," Shouta admits, rubbing his eyes.

Outside the hallway, there's a screech of shoes on the floor and the door of the classroom flies open.

"Aizawa-sensei!" Ashido Mina blows in, her presence electric. "I have my essay, so please grade it!" She slaps it down on her desk, before her eyes catch Yamada on the desk. "Ah! Present Mic-sensei! Was I interrupting anything?"

Yamada stifles a laugh as Shouta looks at his student. She's bouncing on her heels, clearly excited about something, and it stings at his heart—she's a hero student with such a bright future. Something Shouta never had.

"No, Ashido. You're not interrupting at all. I was just grading papers and Yamada was keeping me company, which is a tad unfortunate, given his loud and annoying voice."

"Hey!" Yamada scowls indignantly and Ashido giggles, before the door is thrown open again.

"Mina! What are you doing? You're so slow!" Kaminari Denki slides in, followed by Sero Hanta. "Hurry up—ah, hey Aizawa-sensei, Present Mic-sensei!"

"Sorry!" Ashido sprints out of the room, and Kaminari and Sero follow, with a quick wave goodbye.

"So, they're growing on you?" Yamada grins. "You care about them."

He doesn't ask. It's a statement instead of a question. Yamada's green eyes scan him and despite Shouta being a master at hiding himself, he's known him long enough to read his emotions.

"Fine," he spits. "I do care about them. What point are you trying to make, Yamada?"

"Hey, hey, don't get too defensive." He puts his hands up in surrender, but he keeps his eyes on Shouta, a grounding green. "I'm just saying that if your cold, cold heart could soften because of twenty some kids, you could actually stop leading your double life and just be a hero instead." Yamada peers at Shouta, lips pursed and feet tossed lazily on a desk. "Not gonna be biased or ridiculously sentimental, but you're good, Shouta. You're a good man and you don't have to be the bad person they told you to be. You're capable of change."

Shouta sighs, standing from his seat. "Maybe you're right, Yamada. Maybe I can still be a good guy. But I'm way too far in to really change, and I know that I'll be a villain for a long time, maybe until I die. So save your breath for someone else." He picks up his keys, shooting a heavy glare at his friend. "I'm going to get lunch so lock up when you decide to go."

"Alright. Whatever you say, Shouta." Hizashi holds his glance for a long moment, before Shouta walks out the door.

(Maybe his stars could've been gray instead of black, had he chosen to let Yamada help him. But he doesn't. Instead, he waits and the stars stay dark, with no hope of lightning.)



# MY TERMS

by bitchykacchan

Shoto never wanted to be a hero. It wasn't who he was. Not after everything his father had done to him. At first, he had thought that maybe he would be able to be a hero out of spite. Become number one on his own terms. But that wasn't the case after he killed his mother. No, he became a villain that morning when he saw her body in their bedroom. There was no way to avoid it.

He didn't show up to school that morning, nor any morning after. He stopped going to UA entirely.

~

**BREAKING NEWS:** *Another fallen hero. Endeavor has been M.I.A for about a month now. Many wonder if the hero has been injured or killed in a surprise villain attack.*

"No use watching your own handy work you know"

Shoto huffed as the TV turned off despite him not having the remote in his hands. He turned around to look at the very man who had ruined his view and rolled his eyes.

"Katsuki since when do you have permission to control what I watch on the TV" Somehow it doesn't matter how many times he tells Katsuki this, he doesn't understand. He should really be careful of the way he presents himself to Shoto.

"Aw come on babe. You get so pissy when you watch the news why should I let you watch it?" Katsuki moved forward, now standing behind him on the couch. He ran his fingers through Shoto's hair, smirking when he leaned into his gentle touches.

"Mm because you're not the one in charge here. So I'm not sure you really get a choice in the matter" Shoto responded. Despite Katsuki's stubborn attitude he has to admit that he loves the way it feels when he is gentle. When he isn't being a total jackass.

"Sure sure, I'm not the one in charge. You're great at making that clear, baby. But I love you despite your constant reminders of that and will always be here to make sure you don't want the news when you know it's going to piss you off" Katsuki's hands tightened around the hair in them for a moment before relaxing again. "Come on baby let's go plan some more. Your dad's long gone. We have to focus on the other baddies now. You promised" he hummed, letting his hands slide down to Shoto's shoulders.

Ah right. They were not to call themselves villains. It was vigilante or Katsuki was out. Not that he really had a choice. He could never go back to being a hero

now. It was too late for him. That and despite how much Shoto loves him, he would never let him go that easily. Katuski's only chance out of this place is death.

"Yes I promised but I wanted to watch the announcement of my father's death and you just turned the tv off so why exactly should I stand up and help you plan the death of another fake hero?" There was no malice to Shoto's tone. No anger but there was an ever so slight hint of annoyance. Katsuki was sure at this point that was just his tone whenever they spoke together.

"Fine" Katsuki grumbled, pulling his hands away from Shoto and crossing his arms over his chest. He turned the stupid TV back on and went out of the living room. God Shoto can be such a pain in the ass. It's not like it's going to be new information. Shoto can be such a fucking baby sometimes.

Katsuki went into Shoto's office and sat down in his chair, looking over his plans. He knew that Shoto didn't want to just stick to vigilante work. He knew full well Shoto was on the path to become a real villain and he has been since the start. But Katsuki doesn't want that. He doesn't want to prove all those kids wrong. Not after all these years of hard work. He only agreed to go with Shoto because he loved him. With every day that Shoto's condition gets worse, Katsuki regrets that more and more. He still loves him a lot. In fact, more than he has ever loved anyone ever. But he can't bring himself to love the work he wants to do.

It took a while of Katsuki sitting in there alone for Shoto to come in and take the seat next to him. Katsuki didn't look at him or open his mouth. He was upset and he believed rightfully so. Even the gentle touch of Shoto's hand on his thigh wasn't enough to make Katsuki look at him.

"They gave us both credit this time" Shoto whispered. He hopes that will help Katsuki speak to him at least. "They said villains Floe and Paroxysm this time"

"Good for me I guess" he muttered. He still doesn't really like this. He doesn't like that they call him a villain. Plus he never picked that name. It sounds so stupid. But Shoto refused to let him use his original hero name. He's pretty sure that ground zero is a fine name that could go either way but whatever works best for him is whatever at this point.

"Katsuki I know you're upset, I'm sorry. I just wanted to make sure they got the facts right. Imagine if they had revealed the wrong information?" Shoto ran his hand up Katsuki's leg, touching his chest under his shirt and smiling at him. "Come on baby don't be mad at me"

Oh, but Katsuki was mad. Katsuki was plenty mad. So mad in fact that he stood up, pushing Shoto's hand away. "Whatever. If they had the wrong information maybe things would be better off. Hell, maybe they'd realize I don't want to be here. You're ridiculous and I can't believe that you think that your bullshit news story is worthy of getting annoyed with me and then thinking oh I'll just touch him and it'll all be better. Well it's not better. I don't fucking want this. I don't want to be a villain, Sho. I love

I really do. But I can't fucking do this. I wanted to be a hero. It's all I wanted. I wanted to be like All Might. Be good. The opposite of whatever this is. But you don't seem to care what I want"

Shoto looked calm. Dangerously so in fact. He looked so calm that the more he stared the more nervous Katsuki got.

"Right. Of course." he stood and Katsuki found himself wanting to sit back down and pretend nothing had ever been said.

"But as we all know you never would have been a hero. I saved your ass from the streets. You may have gotten accepted into UA but there was no way you ever got better enough from your bullshit to become a hero. You make children cry. You make survivors guilty for being survivors. I'm sorry that you seem to be so fucking dense that you can't realize you were never going to be a hero." Shoto's voice didn't raise once. He seemed so calm. But his words hurt so much. "Get out of my office."

Katsuki's chest was tight and his eyes were wet. He was fighting tears back into his eyes. "Right" Was all he said, standing up and exiting Shoto's office. He went back to their bedroom and sat on the bed, trembling. Of course. Of course, Shoto thought that too. Everyone thought that. He's nothing but a villain and he's never going to be anything but a villain.

With his quirk and personality the way they are, there is nothing else that Katsuki will ever get to be. And now he has solidified that. They're putting his name in the news. He's got no way back now.

~

Katsuki sat there for hours. He festered there in his anger and sadness and loneliness. And when Shoto came back in with that dull expression on his face, Katsuki was ready for him.

"Katsuki I'm sorry for what I said to you."

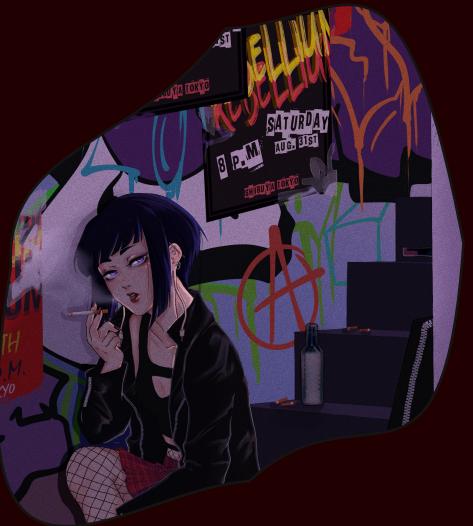
"Mm that's okay baby you were right. There's no hope for me anymore" He whispered, smirking and standing up. He grabbed Shoto's shirt and kissed him harshly, pressing him back into the wall.

Shoto was shocked and confused by how quickly he had moved on. He tilted his head and leaned into the kiss, humming softly into his lips. He pulled his head away and smiled slightly. "I'm glad to hear you're not upset with me"

"Mm not upset is quite the overstatement" Katsuki's voice was quiet, barely audible. But the explosion that left his hands was loud. Deafening. It was one of his bigger, sending them both in opposite directions and breaking down the building around them.

He stood up, ears ringing and face black with the aftermath of the explosion. "You may be right, Sho. I may be a villain. But I'm a villain on my own terms"

# ARTISTS



VIICK04ART



ACCEBERART



EXPLOSIONBOI



HERMES



REIICAL



LORILANDA



SKARTLIE



PAN-GYA



CYANELLO



LAIRAYA



NOZARASHI



SLEEPYWITCHNARCOLEPSY



ALLTIMELOWEST



SEEKINGPETRICHOR



ANCIENTGERMANIA



DOMI



LAIRAYA



STANNUMART



ROWYN



SIBYLWHISP



FRIEDEGGTARTS



LUCKYDANART



NOZARASHI



WITCHYCHUU

# WRITERS



WITCHYCHUU



SEEKINGPETRICHOR



DOMI

REBELLIUM BY SHIMIKONDE

PARTNERS BY TAYLOR SMITH

TREASON BY BUNNY

CATALYZE BY ACHIEVING ELYSIUM

DECONSTRUCTION BY AMUK

VIRAL VALENTINE BY SIBILANTWHISPER

LET'S KILL ALL MIGHT BY OHSHITMYSHIP

THE MAKS BY CALUCADU

OF A FLOWER PLACED IN THE ALCOVE BY  
SHIMIKONDE

ENDARKENED STARS BY KIROIIMYE

MY TERMS BY BITCHYKACCHAN